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2

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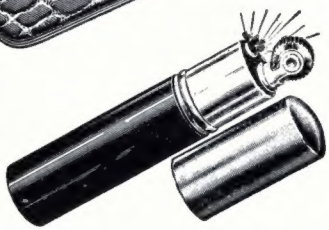
3



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Ask any service man what gifts are most appreciated and you'll find that a Billfold, Cigarette Case and a Lighter are high on the list of most wanted and most useful articles. Imagine how pleased any boy would be to receive all three at one time in a matching set such as this. A gift to last for years and one he'll remember always.

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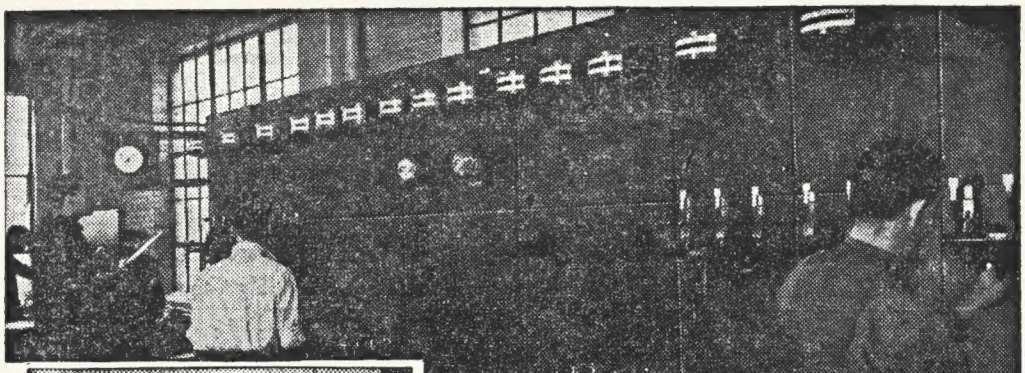

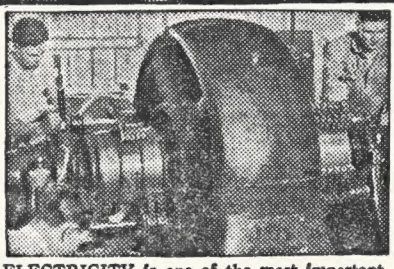

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ZORRO SAVES A HERD.....Johnston McCulley 82
Zorro's Blade is a Match for the Hidden Pistol of Carlos Lopez

SMOKELESS POWDER.....Alan M. Emley 89
Old Sheriff Horn Proves He Still Has a Trick or Two Up His Sleeve!

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Special Features

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STRAIGHT TO THE BOTTOM..Westbrook Pegler 111
A Message for All Americans

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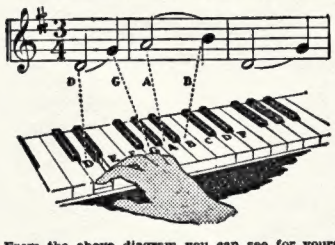
Yet it's from the famous "Merry Widow" Waltz

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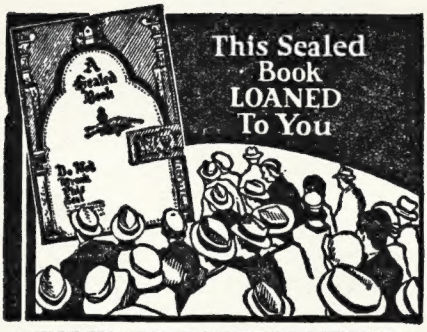

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

there were no prizes, just the honor of winning, or the winning of an argument or wager.

Just before the Fourth of July in 1883, at Pecos, Texas, there were several arguments as to which cowboy of a big section of the country there was the fastest roper or best bronc rider. This section involved took in ranches where the cowboys had not worked together, or more territory than was usually embraced in the contests held at the end of the roundups.

The First Rodeo Prizes

It was decided to hold a roundup of riders and ropers on Independence Day, and to award prizes to the winners. A total of a hundred dollars was offered. Fifty dollars in bronc riding, and the same in steer roping.

This purse was made up by donations of a few dollars each from several cattlemen or ranch owners and the contests were held on an open flat near the court house. No admission was charged spectators and it was the spectators on horseback who served as the arena fence as they formed a semi-circle, keeping the bucking bronco or steer to be roped confined within the circle.

This riding and roping contest made the greatest Independence Day celebration Pecos had ever had. Then, five years later, in Prescott, then Arizona Territory, to be exact on July 4th, 1888, there was held a riding and roping contest, the first one to award prizes to the winning contestants and at the same time charge admission to the spectators.

It was called a Cowboy Tournament, but it was the first regular rodeo as a box office

(Continued on page 102)

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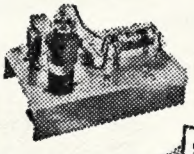

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Conducted By FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

GREETINGS, waddies. As we prepare to dish up this feed of rodeo news and gossip we have the old Chuck Wagon rolling toward New York, where the World's Championship Rodeo is billed to open in Madison Square Garden for the longest run and with the biggest cash prizes ever known during the fifty-seven years that rodeos have been in existence in America.

I don't know if I ever told you before just how this game we now call rodeo started, and if I did it has been so long ago that a lot of readers who have in the past year or so discovered what a swell Western magazine this is, missed the story. Inasmuch as we are just turning into the homestretch of the rodeo season and the opening of the Nineteenth Annual World's Championship Rodeo in the Garden, the story will bear retelling.

First, the rodeo, or cowboy sports, is the only American sport to spring from a great industry, and that industry is the raising of cattle, which really did not get well under way until after the Civil War. During that war as in the present conflict there was a shortage of manpower in Texas and the Southwest.

Cattle were so cheap before the Civil War that they were slaughtered on the range and the hides and tallow derived from the slaughtered animals were the only things of commercial value obtained therefrom.

Cattle Ran Wild

During the Civil War, Texas cattle ran wild and of course greatly multiplied, and when the men came back from the battlefields at the close of the war they found thousands upon thousands of head of wild cattle roaming all over the country, but they were still not worth bothering with to any great extent because there was no market for them. Sometimes what markets there were, were so far away that the cost of getting the animals to market far exceeded the price obtained.

A few years after the close of the Civil War, with the building of the railroad as far west as Dodge City and Abilene, Kansas, a great market was opened for cattle, and it was then that the cowboy was really born.

Cattle were bringing as much as ten dollars a head at the Kansas markets. That meant that a herd of two thousand steers might bring as much as twenty thousand dollars.

Today two thousand head of good fat steers would bring around two hundred and sixty thousand dollars, but the price then paid was enough to start practically an army of men in the cattle business.

Unfenced Range

It must be remembered that in those days the range was unfenced, ranch houses were few and far between, and the cattle of one rancher would stray across the imaginary boundary line separating two ranches and mingle with the cattle of another rancher.

It became a custom for several cattlemen in one section of the country to throw all their cowboys into one big crew twice each year and round up all the cattle they could get to, separate the cattle as to brands, brand the calves and cut out the fattest cattle, those ready for the market, which were started up the long overland trail to market.

It was natural that where a great number of cowboys from different ranches were thrown together in their work that there should be arguments and bantering as to which ranch was the home of the fastest roper or greatest bronc rider. In order to settle those arguments and wagers, there was usually a riding and roping contest held at the close of each roundup. These were more or less impromptu affairs, and

(Continued on page 8)

GET INTO RADIO ELECTRONICS & TELEVISION NOW!

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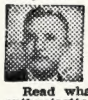

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Bainter flung the contents of the pail straight into Sabin's face (Chap. IV)

A Full-Length Action Novel

THE COMANCHERO

By WAYNE PURCELL

Lieutenant Tobe Bainter of Texas Rides Into the Staked Plains Country to Halt a Mysterious Reign of Terror and Death That Menaces the Lives and Property of Innocent Cattlemen!

CHAPTER I

Alkali Trail

THE *Llanos Estacados!* Staked Plains of the Texas Panhandle, stretching under a blistering sun across a vast territory. Desolate, treacherous, arid, they reared upward suddenly from steep scarps on its eastern border among the splintering canebrakes in the *llano* hills, and then flung themselves flat along the trackless sands, touching New Mexico on its western fringe.

It was a strange, level sweep, streaked with sudden canyons and gullies which slashed down secretly into the burning sands. Hidden box-car canyons, horse-belly high in buffalo grass; and flashing streams.

These, it was said, served as hiding and meeting places for the coppery-hued terrors of the plains—the Comanches. Renegade outlaws and their swart-faced fraternity from the other side of the Rio Grande also found the hiding places to their liking, for

Lured by the Greed for Wealth, Sinister Conspirators

the breaks in the Plains were few and hidden, and accessible only to those who knew how to find them.

The southern tip of this raised mesaland, from the headwaters of the Rio Concho to Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos, was also a scorched, sun-baked waste. No shaded indentations, no sheltered gullies crisscrossed this desolate hundred-mile stretch. Only ocotillo cactuses and towering, spiny yuccas rose out of the sands. Nothing lived, nothing moved here.

Nothing moved? Then what were those sinister forms crawling stealthily forward in the dust under the brassy sun? So close to the earth that instead of casting shadows, were themselves the shadows.

And what was that thin, spiraling cloud that suddenly made its appearance on the distant horizon, slowly growing in size, rising higher and higher?

No wind-breath stirred a grain of sand, yet the cloud grew larger, darker; began to move up across the mesa. Like a huge, threatening thunderhead it came rolling, with a low, rumbling sound, as of thunder. . . .

On that far horizon, a group of weary Texans were stubbornly chousing on a herd of longhorns from the Concho Basin. That made the rumbling thunder. Haggard, with lips cracked, and eyes bloodshot, they rose masked to the eyes. Otherwise they could not have breathed in the bitter alkali dust clouds raised by the trampling, pounding hoofs of the longhorns.

The small herd—about five hundred head—was in a bad way. The long-bodied, long-legged steers were bawling for water. Their flanks were gaunt, their ribs stood out like spokes in a straw basket, their tongues lolled and their heads hung low in weariness, their long horns almost touching the ground. But the cowboys on their ribby, jaded mounts kept them moving.

THE gray-haired, tight-lipped man who was riding swing on the left—Ed Taylor, owner of the cattle—headed off a wandering cow and drifted back to the drag. Two young cowboys were whipping the drags on, yelling at them, shouting themselves hoarse.

"We lose many this afternoon, Red?" The oldster asked one of them. Gaunt-faced, red-eyed, Taylor looked as spent as his cattle.

"About twenty, Boss," replied the puncher, carrot-topped, slim "Red" Martin. His forehead was caked and grimy with dust. "But we're goin' to lose more if we don't hit the Gap soon."

Taylor nodded. "Come sundown," he said, "and we ought to be gettin' a whiff of the Pecos."

It was not long before sunset. The sun, a bright, fiery ball, was sinking fast in the western sky. Even now, a reddish haze covered the horizon in advance of the weary, plodding herd.

"Any Injun-signs, Boss?" asked Martin.

"No," replied Taylor. "Looks like we're gettin' through without any trouble."

The oldster prodded his mount and disappeared in a wavering dust cloud. Martin's drag partner, Jud Barlow, reined up alongside the redhead. Only a pair of blue eyes showed between the kerchief-covered face and the wide-brimmed J. B.

"What Taylor say, Red?" Jud asked.

Young Martin told him.

"Oh," he muttered, "we ain't lost many. But if we don't get to water soon, Taylor's goin' to lose more than his herd."

"What yuh mean, Jud?" asked Martin.

"Ain't yuh heard?" demanded Jud. "Taylor's goin' to lose the Box T if we don't reach Fort Burns and sell these beefs."

Red Martin pursed his dry lips and whistled.

"Shore," continued Jud. "Just before we left, that feller Harris who owns the general store in town rode up and told the boss he's takin' the outfit over if Taylor can't meet his note."

"Yeah," replied Jud sarcastically. "That Harris gent owns the store—and the saloon, and the bank, and no tellin' what-all else."

The two waddies went back to their business of cracking the ends of their quirts on the flanks of the faltering, bellowing steers.

The ill-fated herd rumbled forward in the gathering dusk, driven by half a dozen cowboys and the gray-haired man who owned the longhorns. The sun dropped lower, and finally became a fading memory beyond the western wall of the earth. Like a storm-cloud, dust hung over the herd, merged with the descending gloom and made the air murky.

Then it was that, without warning, a horde of howling, half-clad savages, with feathers waving from raven hair, hurtled down upon

Join Forces to Devastate a Prosperous Rangeland!

Ed Taylor's crew. They charged upon the hapless cowboys and poured a withering hail of lead at them.

"Comanches! Comanches!" yelled Red Martin, pulling his Colts and blasting away with both barrels.

Taken by surprise, and hopelessly outnumbered, the Texans fought back desperately, valiantly. But it was futile.

The Comanches swept over them in a tidal

Tobe Bainter

wave of killing, cutting Concho Basin cowboys down from their ponies as scythes would make windrows in a wheat field.

Frightened steers stampeded at the sound of gunfire, as the cowboys fought for their lives. Ed Taylor, bleak-faced, crouched behind his fallen horse and emptied a cylinder of .45 slugs at the Indians.

"The end of the trail," he croaked hoarsely. "Poor Jane!"

His voice gurgled off on a note of terror as a blurry form detached itself from the lengthening shadows, surged upon him and clove his skull with a whistling tomahawk.

So died Ed Taylor, with the name of his daughter on his lips. But he was spared the sight and sound of the slaughter that ensued.

Only one man escaped immediate death that night—the carrot-topped cowboy, Red Martin. A bullet had found him in the first burst of gunfire and spilled him from saddle. Simultaneously, his horse was hit and fell back with the redhead.

A crushing weight landed on Martin. The sky suddenly seemed to explode in his face. Then he knew no more.

EASTWARD from the canebrakes that marked the border of the *llanos*, lay a fertile prairieland, webbed with streams and rivers, and grown high with lush grass. Interlaced with small gullies and sheltering ridges, it was ideal cattle country.

Large herds roamed and grazed the Middle Concho Basin and the buildings of some twenty outfits sprawled across its length. In the center of the Basin was located the sun-washed town of Winton.

At one time, the citizens of Winton used to point with pride to the town's adobe bank building. It was the largest edifice there. On its left was a general store and further down was a saloon—all three owned by Major Web Harris, concededly the richest man in the Basin.

There were other stores—a barber shop, an undertaker, a printing shop and some others. And oddly enough, a second general store was directly opposite the bank, owned by a quiet man named Cal Raven.

People had shaken their heads when Cal Raven had opened for business. But he was a likable fellow and seemed to get along. Even Major Harris was heard to say that competition was good for trade.

Of course the Major had not been so pleased when he had learned that Cal Raven was extending a good deal of credit to the ranchers. But that was abviously a small matter to a man of the Major's holdings. Hadn't he just acquired the spread next to Ed Taylor's Box T? By virtue of the owner's failure to pay a note. In any event, it was the Major's.

This afternoon the high west Texas sun was a brassy ball in the sky, and few booted cowboys stirred the dust of Winton's sleepy main street when the quiet was suddenly broken by the furious pounding of hoofs on sun-baked turf. A gap-toothed, freckled rider came speeding into town—Slim Cutler, long a rider for Jim Reardon's Rocking R outfit.

Slamming out of leather, he burst into Cal Raven's general store, to confront a group of startled cowmen.

"Red Martin, of the Box T was just brought in!" he cried, panting hard.

The cowmen stared at him.

"Martin?" demanded Chris Evers, owner of the C E brand. "Where'd they find him?"

Evers face was a weatherbeaten one with blue eyes, and a handle-bar mustache streaked with silver to match his hair.

"This side the Brazos," replied the panting cowboy. "He's dyin'! Got a bullet in his chest and his ribs are smashed. Don't see how he made it. All he can say is, 'Comanches'! Nobody else that was with Ed Taylor's longhorn herd on the Staked Plains got away! Where's my boss, Cal?"

"Saw Reardon go into the bank, Slim," answered Cal Raven, his homely, friendly face drawn at the news he had heard.

"Ed Taylor was the boss' best friend," declared Slim Cutler, and went out.

In somber-eyed silence the men watched the cowpuncher cross the street and disappear into the bank. Then they looked at each other with foreboding.

"Cussed killers!" growled Fred Webber, owner of the Flying W, a big, flabby-skinned man with huge paws and a deep, husky voice. "This time they got Taylor. Who'll it be next?" His lower lip trembled.

"It's too bad about Taylor, Fred," Evers said, his voice quivering with indignation. "But cryin' ain't goin' to help. Charlie Goodnight took his longhorns across the Plains, and others have done it. The Government forts on the Pecos are just cryin' for beef, for the soldiers and reservation Injuns. We got plenty, and it's our job to get it to 'em."

"And what yuh goin' to do with the Comanches, Chris?" demanded another rancher—Ned Hawkes, a shriveled, tough-skinned, humorless man. "Just make believe they don't exist?"

"It ain't enough that they raid our spreads!" cried Webber. "And run off our hosses and beeves, and kill and set fire to our homes!"

"Mebbe the soldiers will clean the Hosshead route," ventured Raven.

Hawkes cackled. "What's the good of the hundred they got stationed outside of town? They can't patrol the whole frontier. We need thousands of 'em."

"We wouldn't need 'em," Webber said grimly, "if they'd stop them cussed Mexicans from tradin' with the Comanches."

"Yeah," agreed Raven. "If the Injuns came to their secret meetin' place out there"—he waved a thumb in the direction of the Staked Plains—"and didn't find guns and ammunition and supplies waitin' for 'em—heck, there wouldn't be no point for 'em to continue raidin' the Basin and the Hosshead trail for cattle. Injuns ain't cattlemen."

"But how are yuh goin' to catch that Injun-tradin' Mexican that keeps these Comanches supplied?" demanded Hawkes bitterly. "He just comes across the Border and disappears in the sands."

"And in the meantime," growled Evers, "our livestock is disappearin', and we're gettin' deeper and deeper in the hole."

THE men nodded agreement. Evers smiled wryly.

"How's our credit holdin' out, Cal?" he asked.

"As long as I have goods," Raven said soberly, "yuh can have 'em. I've got faith in the Basin. We'll beat 'em and get the cattle to the forts yet."

"The Major kinda didn't cotton to yore extendin' credit when *he* stopped, huh?" asked Evers.

"No—reckon not," answered Raven, frowning. Then he glanced at the door. "Here comes Reardon."

The men turned, waiting for the gaunt, stern-faced owner of the Rocking R outfit to enter. Beyond, in the street, they could see Slim Cutler mount and ride off. The sound of his horse's hoofs died away in the distance as Jim Reardon came in. There was a brooding look on his face. His glance struck them like cold flint striking metal.

"Yuh heard?" he demanded.

They nodded wordlessly.

"They're devils!" Reardon cried fiercely. "And that Mexican who supplies 'em is worse." Silence. "Mebbe it was Harris' fault," he muttered.

"What yuh mean, Jim?" demanded Evers, his face reflecting the surprise in the faces of the others.

"No"—Reardon shook his head—"I didn't mean it that way. But just before Ed left, he told me Harris was pressin' him for payment on his note. No, I reckon Ed would have trailed his herd across the Plains anyhow."

"Yuh mean the Major's takin' over the Box T?" demanded Webber. And when Reardon nodded, he said quickly, "How about Ed's daughter?"

"I reckon Jane will come to live with Mar-

Miguel's horse had pitched to the sand, when Juan Pancho pulled his gun and gave a hideous scream (Chap. XVIII)

tha and me," Reardon said abstractedly.

"Heard the Major's got his eye on the girl," observed Hawkes dryly.

"Can't say I blame him," said Evers, his eyes twinkling.

"But ain't he got a family across the Border?" demanded Raven.

"Plenty of family, I hear," said Evers. "But all relatives. His wife—she was Spanish—died a couple of years ago."

Jim Reardon stirred out of his abstraction. "I'm takin' a herd across the Plains—pullin' out tomorrer mornin'," he announced.

Aghast, they stared at him.

"Yuh goin' loco, Jim?" demanded Webber huskily. "With them Comanches settin' plumb astride the trail, and invitin' yuh to come get scalped?"

Reardon shook his head and smiled thinly.

"I ain't got much choice in the matter, Fred," he said. "I also have a note fallin' due." His face became bleak. "Reckon most of us have."

"Why don't yuh trail 'em north to Kansas City, Jim?" asked Webber. "It's safer."

"It's safer, shore. But five times as long, and prices tumblin' every day with the million steers trailin' up there. Ain't got time enough anyhow." He shrugged. "Thought I could get an extension, but—" He shook his head again. "No, I'm headin' for Fort Burns on the Pecos."

"If yuh want to borrer some of my boys, yuh're welcome," offered Evers.

"No, thanks, Chris," said Reardon. "I'll get along."

"Good luck," they called after him as he started out of the store.

A few minutes later, as they watched him jog down the street, Evers said:

"Hope he *don't* need no help."

"Reckon he'd like to have Tobe back now," commented Webber.

"Tobe?" repeated Raven. "Who's that?"

"Oh, a high-ridin', cocky button—Jim's nephew," replied Evers smiling. "They had a fight and Tobe up an joined the War Between the States. Must have been about five years ago."

"Mebbe he was killed," said Raven.

"Mebbe," rejoined Evers. "But if I recollect, Tobe was a right tough younker. Yeah, he'd be a handy gent for his Uncle Jim tomorrer."

Their eyes continued to follow Jim Reardon's figure until it became a pinprick on the horizon and disappeared. And they fell silent, these men, for a premonition of disaster lay on them like a cold breath.

CHAPTER II

Fort Burns

LIEUTENANT TOBE BAINTER, of the Ninth New Mexico Cavalry, stirred restlessly in his sleep. The Army cot groaned under his shifting weight.

Beyond the adobe walls that circled the fort, a late moon battled its way through through dark masses of clouds. Occasionally it slipped clear of them and flung a shaft of silvery light into the open window, onto the face of the sleeper.

His was a young-old face. Lean, with marked lines. Yet he couldn't have been over twenty-five. Old enough, however, to have memories that kept him tossing on the narrow cot. Memories perhaps of the bursting cannons and flaming guns at Gettysburg, of which the now gray ghost of a scar that ran raggedly across his left temple was a constant reminder.

Or perhaps in his sleep he was recalling Antietam, where proud lines of men in gray were mowed down in a brutal hour. That was an hour that cut deeply into his memory, just as a hot fragment of metal had bitten into his neck beneath the collar line. Or perhaps his dreams were of the rattling drums and the bugle call that sounded retreat—the last one—at Appomattox Court House.

Whatever the reason, Lieutenant Bainter slept badly. Then, all at once, he was no longer asleep. A dim, subconscious instinct plucked him awake, stiffened his muscles, keened his senses. For an instant his breathing stopped, then became regular again. But he was fully aware that the usual night noises had suddenly stopped, but now were going on again.

He could hear them all—the hoot of the owl in the tree just outside the fort walls, the distant cry of a lobo wolf baying at the moon from the sandy rise overlooking the whirling Pecos, the moan of the soft wind from the distant snow-capped peaks. And the soft tread of the sentries patrolling front and rear gates.

But his keen ears also told him of an alien sound—a faint, crumbling, scuffling one. A small thing, yet it had been enough to ring

a warning bell in the sleeper's brain. Tobe Bainter's life had been lived over a tinder-box, and this was a sizzling, crackling spark.

Slowly he rolled over, faced the open window. He propped up on an elbow, waited tensely in the semi-dark.

The moon now lay behind a thin cloud bank and cast a faded, hoary light over the empty parade grounds. But out there, something moved, something approached.

With startling suddenness, a shadow loomed in the window. An Indian with a

Juan Pancho

raised tomahawk in hand! For a brief moment the redskin hesitated, his cruel eyes searching the gloom for the sleeper. Then, with appalling speed, he brought his weapon down, whirling, hard.

But Bainter no longer was in bed. In a swift blur of movement he jerked off the covers and leaped tigerishly toward the opposite wall where hung his gun-belt. In the same split-second motion that he pulled his Colt free, he wheeled and fired.

The blast of the shot roared through the room, echoing deafeningly. The Indian straightened up, then teetered back on his heels out of the window frame. Moonlight filtered in where a moment before had been a deadly shadow.

Bainter, tensed like a coiled spring against the wall, smoking gun in hand, heard a heavy thud outside. Moving with the same smooth motion, he pulled the door open and slid into the court-yard. But there was no longer need for caution. Sprawled there beneath his window lay the Indian, dead, a small hole in the center of his forehead.

Cries of alarm swept the enclosure. Lanterns flared, sentries came running, guns cocked.

"Tobe!" cried a voice behind Bainter, the voice of a man who stood in the doorway. Bainter whirled and saw the half-naked body. "Holy cow!" he cried. "Hardtack, put your coat on and get mine, before I freeze out here."

For a second, Lieutenant Bainter's thin, wiry, hawk-eyed orderly, "Hardtack" Johnson, stood rooted. Then he went in and came out again with Bainter's coat.

"Recognize him, Hardtack?" asked Bainter, kneeling beside the dead Indian.

Johnson stooped. "Well, I'll be doggoned," he murmured. "It's him."

"Yeah. Same one." Bainter nodded.

"Then yuh was right!" cried Johnson excitedly.

"Looks like," said Bainter.

BY THIS time soldiers, rifles in hand, had spilled out of the barracks on the other side of the parade grounds. Officers Row hastily emptied, its occupants struggling into clothes. The enclosure filled with running, shouting men.

In the near corner, in the corral, the horses of the "yellow-legs" were trumpeting, snorting, catching the excitement.

The voice of the commanding officer, Colonel Chester, cleaved the racket like a knife. Men fell back, making way for him.

"What's going on here?" he roared. He was a big man with a heavy voice. Then he caught sight of Bainter. "Oh—it's you, Bainter. Did you fire that shot?"

"Yes, suh." Lieutenant Bainter stood at attention.

"Blast it, man!" cried the Colonel. "Why must you wake the whole fort? Ever since I got here it's been noisy around your quarters."

"I reckon it's kind of hard to shoot off a gun and not make noise, suh," returned Bainter.

"What's that?" roared Colonel Chester, bristling, his florid face growing redder. "Why that's impertinent! . . . What's over there?" For the first time he caught sight of the prone, sprawled figure.

"A dead Injun, suh," replied Bainter, smiling faintly.

"Redskin?" bawled the Colonel. "How'd he get in here?"

"Reckon he came over the wall, Colonel," opined Bainter.

"Humph!" growled the Colonel. "How do you know that?" He turned to the crowd. "Back to your quarters, men. Sentries," he ordered, "take the Indian outside and bury him."

In a few moments, silence fell on the huge empty square. Empty save for the Colonel, Bainter and Hardtack Johnson. The orderly had crossed to the wall and was searching its length. Suddenly his cry rose.

"Here it is, Colonel!" he called.

When they reached his side, they found him holding the end of a horsehair rope. The other end ran over the top of the twelve-foot wall and disappeared in a crevice.

"He tied a heavy rock to the end of the rope," said Johnson, "and threw it over. Then he sawed the horsehair back and forth till it made a crack in the 'dobe. The rock stuck in it, and he climbed."

"Come to my office," said Colonel Chester. "Maybe we can get to the bottom of this."

He turned and strode across the parade grounds toward his office, located next to the front entrance of the fort.

As Lieutenant Bainter and Hardtack Johnson followed the Colonel, their Army great coats swishing against their knees, the first faint harbingers of dawn made their appearance.

Quietly darkness had fled, leaving a gray murk in its place. Now this was being shot through with wavering, bony fingers of light.

The figure of the sentry who paced the flat walk atop the entrance, Bainter noticed, was etched in the haze of misty light coming out of the east. In a short while, the sentry of the day would replace the night watch. Reveille would blow and the Napoleon six-pounder would blast its announcement of the new day. And life at Fort Burns would begin all over again.

In the Colonel's office Bainter explained briefly what had happened. Colonel Chester, sitting behind his big, flat-top desk, nodded.

"A reservation Indian?" he asked finally.

"Yes, suh," said Bainter.

"As if we don't have enough trouble," muttered the Colonel, "just keeping them on the reservation and getting enough beef to feed them—and ourselves, too. Why do you think he singled you out for attack, Lieutenant?"

"Well, suh," replied Bainter, "the Comanches hate us Texans. But that ain't the reason. Hardtack and I"—the Colonel lifted his eyebrows at the familiarity between Lieutenant and orderly, but said nothing—"been keepin' our eyes on this particular redskin. We figgered him as the spy who keeps his friends raidin' the Hosshead route informed of our troop movements. Once we trailed him out on the Plains—opined he'd lead us to the place they call the Canyon in the Sands, where the Mexicans and Injuns do their dirty tradin'."

"Yes?"

"Well," continued Bainter, flushing slightly, "he gave us the slip. Then a couple of times we saw him talkin' to Juan Pancho."

"Whom you don't trust," interposed the Colonel. "And whom you suspect to be the Comanchero."

"Yes, suh," declaired Bainter. "And with yore permission, I'd take some men an' tail him. Just to see where he *buys* his cattle."

"You're too impetuous, Lieutenant Bainter," said Colonel Chester. "You have no proof, and then you'd probably wind up at his ranch across the Border and create an international incident. Besides, Senor Pancho has been our chief source of beef. If it weren't for him we would be in a bad way." He shrugged.

"And the Comanchero?" asked Bainter softly.

"We have orders to break up the trade," said Colonel Chester, his face growing stern. "And by Harry, we will!"

OUTSIDE, the bugle suddenly called to reveille. In the growing light, the shadows lessened around Tobe Bainter. He was a lithe, loose-muscled six-footer, with an air of vigilance. It was somewhat contradicted, however, by the lines of laughter that creased his lip and eye corners, and on the other hand was accentuated by his level gray eyes.

A knock sounded at the door and a sentry entered.

"The patrol picked a cowman up, sir," he said. "Pretty badly done in. We put him in the hospital, but he can't last long."

"Lieutenant Bainter," said the Colonel, "will you handle this please, and see what you can learn?"

"Yes, suh."

The Lieutenant and his orderly saluted, left the Colonel, and strode across the square toward the hospital located next to the quarters reserved for the privates.

"Yuh ain't so popular with the Colonel,

Tobe," said Johnson, grinning.

"Well, he ain't so popular with me," declared Bainter, grinning back. "But he's a good hombre."

There was a close bond between these two, cemented by ties of blood and pain. In the battle of Antietam, Bainter had been knocked unconscious by a piece of hot metal. Johnson had crawled out to him and received a ball in his thigh. Fortunately, Bainter recovered and pulled both of them to safety. Thereafter, Hardtack Johnson had refused promotion in order to remain with Bainter.

The pungent odor of medicine struck Lieutenant Bainter forcefully as he entered the hospital. Down at the end of the long, cot-lined room where a nurse was busy, lay the man whose range garb which as yet had not been removed proclaimed him to be the cowman who had been brought in by the patrol. Nearing the bed, Bainter saw that the clothes were flecked with blood and covered thickly with dust.

Then he stopped short, gasped, his eyes widening. And in one stride he was at the bedside, kneeling.

"Uncle Jim!" he cried. "Uncle Jim!" He looked up at the nurse. "It's my uncle, Jim Reardon."

The dying cowman turned pain-drenched eyes on him. For a moment they glazed, then recognition filtered through. He tried to smile, but the effort was too much.

"Howdy, Tobe," he breathed, past gritted teeth.

The man's agony reached Bainter with the impact of a physical blow. He winced as his uncle trembled on the bed before him. It was obvious Jim Reardon couldn't last long.

"Comanches run yore trail herd, Uncle Jim?" asked Bainter.

"Yeah," choked Reardon. "Will yuh do—somethin' for me, Tobe?" It was an effort, and he closed his eyes.

"Shore!" cried Bainter. "Shore I will."

For a moment he thought his uncle was gone. Then he heaved a sigh when the wounded man's eyes fluttered open.

"Tell Aunt Martha," mumbled the dying cowman, "I tried for her—and the ranch"—foam flecked his cracked lips—"but I failed. The note—still not paid."

Suddenly it was all over. The death rattle sounded in Reardon's throat, his limbs twitched, his eyes became unseeing. Then all motion ceased. His body went rigid and the stern, lined face became ghastly.

The nurse, the wife of one of the officers, pulled a sheet over the cowman's face. Then she handed Bainter some papers.

"These were his, Lieutenant Bainter," she said. "You'd better take them. You're his kin."

"Thanks," he mumbled and without glancing at the papers, he left the hospital, his face grim.

Silently Hardtack Johnson followed him back to their quarters.

The room they shared was a typical officer's room. Over the dirt floor was stretched an old Army blanket, to serve as a carpet. Its four ends were fastened down with wooden pegs. The legs of both beds stood in big water tins, to prevent the big red ants from crawling up into bed. And over the beds were nailed rubber blankets, so that centipedes, tarantulas and scorpions would slip to the floor instead of onto the sleeper. In the corner of the room was a fireplace.

"Sorry, Tobe," was Johnson's comment. "Didn't know yuh had an uncle in these parts."

"Other side of the Plains—in Texas," Bainter said soberly. "Ain't seen him for five years. Had a fight with him and joined up. He was right stubborn." He spoke abstractedly. "They brought me up after my folks went. Aunt Martha was Mom's sister. She was all right." His voice was becoming husky.

IDLY he glanced at the papers in his hand. A few old bills, part of a stock inventory. Then his gaze froze on a piece of paper marked "Bank of Winton."

"What is it, Tobe?" asked Johnson.

The lines in Bainter's face hardened. "Aunt Martha's goin' to lose the spread," he said coldly, "if this note for five hundred dollars ain't met."

Johnson's wrinkled, oldish face puckered into an unspoken question. Bainter smiled mirthlessly.

"Reckon the Colonel will be mighty pleased to grant Lieutenant Tobe Bainter a furlough."

"And his orderly," declared Hardtack Johnson.

Bainter's gaze lingered on the orderly a moment, then he nodded. He opened the door.

"But where are we goin' to get five hundred dollars, Tobe?" demanded Hardtack.

"Borrer all yuh can in the barracks, Hardtack," said Bainter. "I'll draw an advance, and see how much I can raise from the officers."

Johnson shook his head. "Can't get much. The men were paid three days ago, and you

know where them sons hightailed when they see the color of money. To the hog-ranch."

"The hog ranch."

"Yeah—and plenty of 'em are still sleepin' it off in the guard-house."

"Pick up whatever yuh can," Bainter said. "I'll raise the rest somehow. And Hardtack—dig out my range clothes."

CHAPTER III

Furlough

ALREADY the morning sun had climbed over the adobe walls that ran square and high around the fort, when Bainter left Colonel Chester's office.

He cast a cursory eye around the parade grounds. Everything was the same — the small, flat-roofed buildings erected against the fort walls with windows facing the inside only, the corral, the shed, the guards patrolling the doors of the commissary and quartermaster's office, the rear entrance with the hay pen just outside it, the tramp of a squad moving across the enclosure.

Nothing was changed, with the possible exception of Lieutenant Bainter himself, now on a thirty-day furlough. The casual light was gone from his gray eyes, the banter from his voice, the smile from his lips.

As he walked past the front entrance of the fort, the huge gates swung open and a swart-faced Mexican, expensively dressed, reined in on a big black. He wore a fancy embroidered vest, hand-tooled boots and pearl-butted guns.

For a moment he seemed to lose control of his mount. The animal reared, pawed the air. Bainter whirled, ducking—just in time to escape the iron-clad hoofs that came thrashing down at his head.

"Pancho!" he cried, his lips thinning. He leaped to the side of the horse, reached out and pulled the Mexican out of leather. "Don't try that dirty trick on me again!"

He lashed out and caught the dark-skinned man, too surprised to resist, on the point of the jaw and sent him sprawling in the dust.

Juan Pancho rose, trembling, his face a black mask of anger. Two boarlike eyes glinted redly in a broad, ugly face.

"Son of a yellow dog!" he cried. "One day you will go too far!" He brushed himself off.

Bainter grinned, his teeth making a white flash in the sun. Action always did that to him—made him feel good inside.

"Yuh forget this ain't Mexico, Senor Pancho," he said. Then his tone changed. "Say, yuh know that Injun friend of yores—from the reservation. Well, they found him climbin' the wall last night. Shot him. Now what do yuh suppose he'd want to do that for?" He watched closely the curious change in Pancho's red eyes.

"Friend?" said Pancho. "The Lieutenant is crazy. I do not make friends with reservation Indians."

"No?" Bainter grinned again. "Just with the Comanches out on the Plains, the ones yuh *buy* yore cattle from with yore cheap whiskey."

"That is a lie!" snarled the squat Mexican. "I—"

"What's this?" demanded a voice behind them. "Oh, it's you again, Bainter. Hello, Senor Pancho."

The gray-eyed Texan turned to find Colonel Chester at his elbow.

"*Buenas dias,* Colonel Chester," said Pancho. "This soldier is insolent. He accuses me of being the Comanchero. I demand an apology."

The Colonel turned, his eyes hard. "Lieutenant Bainter?"

Bainter flushed. He was caught flat-footed. He had absolutely no proof. Nothing—except a curious feeling about the Mexican, which didn't count.

"My apologies, suh," he mumbled.

Pancho grinned in his face, showing yellow, fanglike teeth. Satisfied, Colonel Chester turned to Pancho.

"You bring cattle, I trust?"

"*Si,* Colonel. Five hundred head."

"Good!" applauded the Colonel. "We'll take them all, and wish you had more."

"May I ask, Colonel," demanded Bainter, "if the herd comes from the *senor's* ranch in Mexico?"

"Not this time, Lieutenant Bainter," answered Pancho grinning. "This time I buy the cattle from a friend. The bill of sale is here, if the Lieutenant would desire to look." He took the paper from his pocket.

Bainter glanced briefly at it and handed it to his superior. Saluting, he left the two men.

He did not know exactly what he had hoped to see, but his disappointment was keen. The paper marked "Bill of Sale" was simply a memoranda of five hundred head

of Box T cattle sold to Juan Pancho. The bill was signed by Ed Taylor. . . .

COWBIRDS wheeled in flight. Long-legged cranes made a whooshing sound as they flapped out of the willows along the river. Lieutenant Bainter, followed by Hardtack Johnson dipped down the cutbank and sent his sorrel gelding into the whirling current of the Pecos. Soon the riders splashed their mounts up onto the east bank.

"Yuh look kind of different, Lieutenant," remarked Johnson, grinning.

"Yeah," agreed Bainter. "Kind of makes me feel like I'm goin' home."

Gone were the black campaign hat, the short, fringed buckskin jacket, the yellow-striped blue breeches, the rattling saber at his side. Instead, he wore a white sombrero, strapped about his lean jaw by a strip of rawhide, spurred boots, a cartridge belt with a Colt .45 Frontier Model showing in the open-work holster, and the otherwise usual range outfit. Johnson was dressed similarly.

For a while the two riders toiled through a dense wood of cedar and scrub oak. Then they emerged, and topped a sandy rise. To the south curved the sun-streaked Pecos. Ahead of them stretched the vast Staked Plains, grim-looking, barren. A perplexed look came to Hardtack Johnson's wrinkled face.

"Yuh ain't aimin' to cut across the Plains from here to get to the Basin, are yuh, Tobe?" he asked. "I figgered we was takin' the Hosshead route?"

"Couple of days ago, Hardtack," replied Bainter, "we tailed that Injun out there, till he gave us the slip. I got a notion we wasn't far from the Canyon in the Sands. Mebbe we can locate it on the way over. Anyhow, we only got five days till Aunt Martha's note falls due, and we got to hustle. The Basin lays just to the other side, straight across from here. The Hosshead route makes a long circle. Too long."

"Nobody's done it before, Tobe," said Johnson. "And how about water for the hosses?"

"Don't worry. We'll find it."

The orderly shrugged. Too often in the past had he expressed skepticism regarding his friend's confident, almost cocksure statements, only to be dumbfounded later when they were proved true.

"Well," he said, "it's yore funeral." Suddenly he remembered something. He plunged his hand into his pocket and withdrew a handful of coins and some bills. He took off his hat and threw them into it. The coins made a jingling sound. "Here's what I collected, Tobe."

Bainter gazed ruefully at the collection. "Ain't goin' to be enough," he said. Quickly he counted the money, looked up. "It ain't. This makes one hundred dollars with what I've got. We need five."

Hardtack Johnson shook his head. "Where are we goin' to get the rest?"

The lines around Bainter's eyes suddenly deepened. "If I remember right," he declared,

[Turn page]

"Yuh Better Stop Wide-Loopin' My Stock—or I'll Pistol-Whip Yuh!"

CARSON TUTHILL was blunt. "I ain't letting any guerrilla soldier come here and horn me out. Savvy? Stay off my range and quit brandin' my stock. I'm too big for you to buck—and if yuh try it I'll peg yore hide out to dry!"

IT DIDN'T take much courage for Tuthill to talk this way to cowboy John Prescott—because all of Tuthill's men were present to back him up in any gunplay. So Prescott let him talk—and filed his words away for future reference. And when the showdown came there was plenty of roaring action—in POWDER RIVER PRESCOTT, a swift-moving quick-trigger novel by Lee Owen that packs a dynamite punch!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

"there used to be a saloon in Winton where high stakes crossed the poker tables. If it ain't closed down mebbe we can raise a collection for Aunt Martha."

"Yuh could also lose the hundred," growled Johnson.

Hardtack opened his mouth to speak. Then, remembering what he did, he remained silent. But only for a moment.

"Bet the Colonel was glad to get rid of yuh?" he commented.

Bainter smiled. "I reckon I made him a happy man today. He even gave me a letter to the commandin' officer of the troop stationed at Winton—Captain Stack."

The desert swallowed the two men in its hot maw. Miles of rolling sand hills and flats, dotted with cholla and spiny yucca sentinels passed under their horses' hoofs. The burning sun mounted the ladder of the sky and blasted the hides off man and mount. Heat and dust rose from the sands. Sweat rolled down the faces of the riders in steady streams. Their neckerchiefs became soaked and their shirts stuck to their backs like glue.

Bainter set a steady, merciless pace, his sense of direction keen despite the glare.

"We'll rest here, Hardtack," he said about noon.

They had reached a sandstone bluff, rearing high in the desert—a peculiar freak of Nature. And now a blessing to man and horse. They pulled rein in its shadows and watered their horses at the shallow, muddy pool that rose half a foot in the scooped pit. Then they threw themselves down on the sands, took long drags from their canteens.

They waited until the sun began to descend toward the western horizon, then topped their mounts and once more rode into the still shimmering sands. They spoke little, conserving their energy.

IT SEEMED impossible for Bainter to be following a trail in the trackless waste, yet he kept an unwavering course. With his gray eyes mere slits in his face, he conned the sands for little, telltale marks—a twisted cactus, the position of the sun, a peculiarly shaped dune.

All at once, the sun began to sink fast. In an incredibly short time it was wavering on the horizon. Then it vanished in a ruddy haze. Almost immediately night spread its panoply over the desert. A million diamonds twinkled in the sky.

"Get the coffee boilin'," Bainter told Hardtack as he drew rein again. "I'll take care of the hosses."

He loosed the cinches and threw the saddles on the ground. In a short time they had eaten, then they relaxed around the dying embers of the fire. Before it was dead, they had rolled into their blankets and were asleep. . . .

The next day was repetition of the first. The sun cooked them, dried them, frazzled them. Still Bainter pressed on. The horses began to pant. Their sides heaved, tongues lolled.

"No shade to rest in today, Hardtack," Bainter said. "We'll have to keep movin'."

In the late afternoon Bainter pulled to a halt at a small outburst of shale and pitted boulders.

"That's where we lost the Injun," he said.

They skirted the shelf of rocks, reined to and searched the horizon. Rolling miles of sand stretched endlessly in every direction.

"Where do we go from here, Tobe?" queried Johnson.

"Not much choice," replied Bainter. "We got to get to the Rockin' R. We'll just have to keep pushin' east. Mebbe—" He shrugged his unspoken thought.

They plodded on. It was the hawk-eyed orderly who first noticed the track.

"Tobe," he cried. "Look!"

"Cow prints," Bainter muttered. "And by the looks, not more'n six or seven days old. Come on Hardtack. Can't be just one cow alone."

As fast as they could they followed the tracks, and suddenly were in the midst of a sea of cattle hoofprints. The cow whose trail they followed had evidently wandered out of the herd and then had cut back into it. The herd trail pointed west.

"Got a hunch," said Bainter, "that this back-track'll lead us where we want to go."

They pushed their jaded horses hard now and swept along through the waning afternoon. Suddenly the trail thinned down to a few tracks.

With breath-taking abruptness, Bainter, in the lead, saw the sand floor slice down into a crevice. He pulled hard on the reins and his blocky horse reared high in the air, snorting with fear.

"Hardtack!" he yelled, dismounting.

The orderly rode up and slid from saddle. Together they knelt, gazed down—and gaped.

"Well I'll be hanged!" muttered Johnson.

Below them, slashing far and deep into the desert, was a tremendous canyon. A thin, winding line of silver indicated a stream. Tall trees lining the bottom looked like miniatures. A swooping eagle was no bigger

than a sparrow. "The Canyon of the Sands," said Bainter.

They made their way to the bottom, over a broad and easy trail bearing cattle marks. Smelling water, their horses made for the stream and plunged nuzzles deep, sending up a shower of silvery spray.

"This is shore a cattleman's paradise," commented Hardtack.

The canyon lengthened out into a valley that was a natural park. There was lush grass, shade trees, gullies, water.

"That's what it's being used for—a spread," said Bainter, pointing to a spot recently cropped by cattle. "And plenty of Injun marks, too. Yeah, this is the place we been lookin' for for a long time."

"The Colonel ought to make yuh a captain for this, Tobe."

"Colonel or nothin'," Bainter said and grinned. "But first we got to drop in on Aunt Martha. His grin disappeared. "And tell her about—Uncle Jim. . . ."

TWO nights later, Tobe Bainter and Hardtack Johnson set their mounts on the road leading through the Middle Concho Basin to the town of Winton. In the distance, they could already make out the town's glittering lights. Beyond, rugged and towering, lay the dark, shadow-casting Elbow Range.

An unaccountable feeling welled up and choked Bainter, as he realized that beyond the town lay the Rocking R ranch—his home. At least it was the only home he had known since his parents had died in Kansas City, and left him as a youngster in the care of his mother's sister Martha, and the man she married, Jim Reardon.

"Can't wait till we get to town," commented Johnson, "and get the sand out of my teeth and the wind out of my body with some good chuck."

"Yeah," muttered Bainter.

But he wasn't listening to Johnson's chatter. Wheels of memory were turning in his brain. Memories of the years he had spent in the saddle chousing Rocking R cattle, becoming expert with rope and gun. Good years and exciting ones. Memories of blue-eyed, kindly Aunt Martha, who had taken the place of his mother in his affections. And memories of Jim Reardon—stern and forbidding in appearance, unapproachable in heart, irascible in temper.

As Bainter jogged along, he was aware of an eagerness, and an exhilarating sense of coming home.

CHAPTER IV

A Contribution

HARDTACK JOHNSON'S voice wrenched Bainter out of his reverie. Without being aware of it he saw that they had drifted to the outskirts of the town.

"Looks like they lighted a bonfire for yore homecomin', Tobe," remarked Hardtack.

Toward the center of the town a building was ablaze. Huge clouds of smoke billowed skyward and inside the clouds darted forked tongues of flame. Leaping sheets of fire lanced the night. The sky reflected the conflagration in a roseate glow.

"Good glory, Tobe!" cried Johnson. "It's either a eatin' house or a general store! Smell the coffee roastin' and bacon fryin'?"

The wafting wind brought the tempting odors to the hungry men. They galloped their weary horses into Winton's main street. Johnson's guess was correct. A general store was burning. They could see the supplies—flour, sugar, coffee—spilled on the street.

Without a word, the two men quickly hitched their nags to a tie-rail and joined the crowd in front of the fire.

In the flickering light, Bainter saw a burly, thick-set man, with a heavily-loaded gunbelt directing the efforts of the other men to fight the fire. A bucket brigade had been formed and they were throwing a steady stream of water on the two buildings adjoining the blazing store. These were separated by wide alleys from the latter. Obviously, the general store was being permitted to burn to the ground.

A man came running down the street, shouting at the top of his lungs. He burst through the bucket brigade circle.

"He's in there!" he yelled. "Raven's inside!" He was a little man and looked like a storekeeper.

"Yuh're crazy," cried the burly man directing the fire brigade. Annoyance showed in his face. "There ain't nobody inside."

"I tell you he is, Sabin!" shouted the little man, panting from exertion. "I saw him in the store a half hour ago, and I just came from his home. He's not there." There was genuine anxiety in his voice.

"Go away, Benson!" cried Sabin brusquely.

"Yuh're only in the way here." He shoved the little man roughly, staggering him.

A faint flush appeared through the dust that caked Tobe Bainter's face. Then he leaped into action.

"Hardtack," he called, rapping out the words clipped and fast. "Take the lead bucket on that side. The fire!"

Without waiting to see Johnson scuttle down the left bucket-line, Bainter darted the length of the right line, seized the bucket from the leader's hands and threw the water into the fire. Sparks hissed out at the contact. An instant later, another pailful, from the other line, struck the flames with a swish.

"Come on!" yelled Bainter, above the roar and crackle of the fire. "Let's get some speed into this! Mebbe this hombre *is* inside!"

But even as he spoke, he saw that it was futile to stop that fire. The store was a roaring mass of flames. Already the fire was eating away the frame of the building. Suddenly the ceiling collapsed, caved. A shower of sparks swished skyward. Neverthless Bainter threw another bucket of water at it. He handed back the empty pail.

"Hey, you!"

The insolent tone rasped Bainter, turned his gray eyes Arctic green. He twisted. It was the man named Sabin who had spoken. A truculent sneer was on the fellow's face.

"Who told you to butt in?" Sabin roared. "Who made you the fire department? Go on! Get to work on them two buildin's."

Bainter's lips thinned in a smile that showed his teeth, startlingly white against his sand-gritted face. That sword-edged smile was a warning to those who knew him.

"Hardtack!" he cried. The orderly was directly across from him on the other line. "I thought we left the Colonel behind. Now why don't yuh foller the Colonel's orders?"

As if by a prearranged signal, two buckets of water were lifted as one and their contents splashed once more into the fire.

Sabin's face grew mottled with rage. Cursing, yelling imprecations at Bainter, he shouted:

"Yuh lame-brained idjit! Yuh—"

A fourth pail had come into Bainter's hands. Grinning broadly, he suddenly flung the contents straight into Sabin's face. The water smashed hard, filled Sabin's open mouth and staggered him back.

For a moment the burly man nearly choked. The move had caught him completely by surprise. He gulped water and air at the same time—spat, swallowed, and heaved. He recovered, sputtering, bristling with rage.

"Mebbe that'll cool yuh off, Colonel," said Bainter.

A LAUGH ran through the crowd.

"Why yuh plumb locoed jackass!" shrieked Sabin. "I'm goin' to wipe the town with yore carcass." His elbows bent as if he were going for his guns.

If he were, he was too late. For once more the full contents of a pail landed on him forcefully. This time from the rear. The blow smacked between his shoulder-blades, water spilling down his neck.

Stunned, more by surprise than by the force of the blow, Sabin stood there dripping wet, trembling with fury. He had half-turned in the direction from which this new attack had come, when a hard voice sounded from beyond the crowd.

"Sabin!"

Bainter, watching Sabin through narrowed eyes, saw him hesitate. Then unwillingly, Bainter thought, he straightened up, brushed himself off and walked slowly toward the edge of the crowd. There, he turned to look back at Lieutenant Bainter.

"Keep out of my way after this," he warned.

"So long, Colonel," Hardtack called after him mockingly.

CHAPTER V

Poker Game

MEN moved aside to let Sabin pass, and the gray-eyed Texan, Tobe Bainter, watched him approach and speak to a man at the edge of the crowd. The man's face was shadowed by a wide-brimmed Stetson and it was impossible to make out his features. In a moment, the man walked away and Sabin strode down the main street.

By this time the walls of the burning store had fallen in and the danger of the fire spreading was past. The crowd drifted away. But Bainter urged the bucket brigade to keep handing him water. Before long, the blackened remains of the store lay in smoldering embers.

"I want to thank you," said a voice with

a clear diction, behind him, "for what you've done."

Bainter turned. It was the slightly stooped little man called Benson. His face was smooth, but he was not young. Yet his eyes were bright now.

"No thanks needed," said Bainter. "I hope yore friend ain't in there."

"I'm afraid he is," said Benson, with worry in his eyes. "I've searched everywhere for Cal." He gazed at the smoking ruins.

"Yuh won't be able to go near that till tomorrer," said Bainter.

"I guess I won't," said Benson. He turned to go, then looked back. "Better watch out for Del Sabin. He's a dangerous hombre."

"Thanks—I shore will," said Bainter, and then to Hardtack Johnson: "Come on—let's sashay over to that Lone Star eatin' house and surround some chuck."

As they entered, the waitress behind the counter eyed the two saddle-tramps dubiously. Climbing on stools, they ordered the entire menu, ignoring the dust and grime of a long journey, and their fire-fighting activities that made them look like gargoyles.

"Trot it out, sister," Hardtack Johnson said hungrily, beaming at her. "Or I'll be jumpin' over the counter soon and be eatin' that left arm of yores."

"My name isn't 'Sister'," the girl said tartly. She was a comely, buxom girl with brown hair and brown eyes. "It's Nellie Sutton. And you'd better not be jumping anywheres if you know what's good for you."

"Nellie, sweetheart," said Tobe Bainter, "do like Hardtack says. We crave yore food, even if it ain't the best."

"I'll have you know—" began Nellie furiously, then stopped as she saw the smile creasing Bainter's face. "Oh, you're teasing me." She laughed. "Maybe you two better wash up. You look like scarecrows."

That was true. A four-day stubble that had sprouted on their faces, together with the sand, and the soot of the fire, made them look weird.

In a short while, washed and brushed off, Nellie's two customers were doing ample justice to thick steaks and heaping piles of potatoes. She hovered about, her eye lingering on the tall, lean-faced cowboy.

Bainter caught her eye and winked at her deliberately, as he grinned. Nellie flushed to the ears.

Hardtack looked up. "He'll have yuh eatin' yore heart out, Nellie," he said, "if yuh don't steer clear of him."

Another customer entered and Nellie left

With startling suddenness the Indian in the window raised a tomahawk (Chap. II)

them. But she drifted back soon, as though drawn by a magnet.

Bainter looked up from his coffee. "See the fire?"

"Yes," she said. "It's kind of tough on Raven. But I bet Major Harris ain't so sorry."

"Why not?" queried Bainter curiously.

"Well, if there were two general stores in town," she replied, "and the one you didn't own burned down—" She shrugged shapely shoulders. "Besides," added Nellie, "Raven gave credit to the ranchers and Harris didn't."

"Who's this hombre Major Harris?" asked Bainter, faint wrinkles creasing his smooth forehead.

He'd had an odd feeling ever since he had entered the town. There was a peculiar atmosphere about the place that he didn't remember being there when he had last seen Winton. The odd feeling was heightened when Nellie gave him an enigmatic look, her brown eyes shuttered, as if to conceal something. And her voice had lost something of its friendliness.

"If you stay here long enough, cowboy," she said shortly, "you'll find out. More coffee?"

BAINTER rose, shaking his head. He took some coins from a pocket and laid them down on the counter.

"Come on, Hardtack," he said. "We got work to do tonight. Tomorrer's five days. Let's get over to the saloon. So long, sweetheart," he threw over his shoulder at Nellie.

"So long," Nellie said to the departing gray-eyed cowboy.

The door slammed shut behind the shorter man who followed at his heels like a faithful dog. Something had been stirred in her in the presence of this casual, laughing puncher.

For a moment longer, Nellie stood facing the door. Then she heaved a sigh, shrugged her pretty shoulders, grabbed a wet rag and began to clean the counter. . . .

The flash of light from the back-bar mirror struck Bainter in the eyes as he entered the saloon. Smoke and sound filled the place. Men were draped comfortably over the edge of the long bar, and the poker tables down the length of the room were crowded with players and watchers.

A tinkly piano was being drummed in a corner and a pretty girl was singing Mexican love songs. She herself was a Mexican, Bainter saw as he drifted toward the bar. She was dark-skinned, wore a flashing comb in her hair, red earrings to match her red lips, a *mantilla*, and a black spangled dress.

He crooked a finger at the bartender, caught his attention and then raised two fingers. The bartender brought a bottle and two glasses, waiting until the silver was laid on the bar.

"Here's for a nice, peaceful vacation," said Hardtack, raising his glass. "But I smell powder in this air."

So Hardtack felt it too, thought Bainter, as he downed his drink. And another thing was making him uneasy—his disappointment at not seeing any familiar faces there, the cowmen of the Basin whom he used to know. Evers, Webber, Hawkes, the rest.

All the faces in the saloon were strange to him also, the faces of rough-looking men of a breed familiar to him. All were stamped with the same brand. He felt as if a weight were pressing down on him, and his high spirits were dampened.

"Let's find a game," he said to Hardtack.

He drifted through the smoke of the room. The girl had ceased singing now. The crowd hadn't even noticed her. Bainter saw a black haired Mexican suddenly appear at her side, and lead her away. There seemed to be an understanding between the two.

"There's a place, Tobe." Hardtack nudged him.

At their right, a bearded player was leaving his seat, and no one had taken his place at the table.

"Any objection, gents?" said Bainter as he slipped into the unoccupied chair.

Grunts that could have meant anything came from the five men seated around the table. Bainter drew out his cash and placed it before him. There was enough on this table right now, he saw, to pay for that little slip of paper in his pocket marked, "Bank of Winton."

"Limit?" he asked.

"No," growled the rock-faced man beside him.

They all possessed distinct and individual features, but above and beyond everything, there was a deadly sameness about these men. A threatening, telltale similarity.

As the first hand was dealt to Bainter, a familiar voice fell on his ear. The voice of Del Sabin.

"Mike," Sabin snapped to a squint-eyed card player across from Bainter, "you hightail. I'm playin' here." Then he saw Bainter. "You!" he growled. "I was kind of hopin' I'd meet up with yuh." A brutal smile spread across his face. "I'm goin' to pay yuh back

plenty for that bath yuh gave—" Then he gasped.

His arms were shifting up and back when they froze. A baffled look came to his small, close-set eyes. A big Colt, filling Bainter's right fist, was staring him in the face. And there had not even been the familiar slap to announce contact between hand and pistol butt.

"Listen Colonel," Bainter said quietly, "I'm right interested right now in playin' poker, not shootin' you full of lead. If yuh want to play, set. I can use yore money too."

Tension suddenly grew in the room, began to accumulate. Scraping chairs told Bainter that cold-faced men were turning to look.

The men at the table, Bainter saw, were watching him out of the corners of their eyes, deliberately waiting. A tiny bead of sweat started down his forehead. Behind him he could feel Hardtack stiffening.

Then something relaxed in him and he smiled faintly. He suddenly knew this trick was his. There was an odd streak in Sabin, a blustering, brutal bully. Perhaps more, but at the moment, his eyes were rigidly fixed on Bainter's gun.

"Stop callin' me Colonel!" Sabin cried, the blood of anger that had filled his corded neck leaving it. He sat down heavily. "I'll play. And after I take yore money—"

"One thing at a time," Bainter said. "Hardtack, take the Colonel's guns and put 'em on the table."

When the orderly had done that, Bainter laid his own Colt down in front of him.

"Start the game," he told the dealer.

CHAPTER VI

An Old Friend Drops In

THE game finally settled down to a contest between Lieutenant Bainter and big, burly Del Sabin.

The whiskey Sabin kept drinking flushed his face and made his eyes seem to grow smaller and redder, but otherwise had no effect. His hands and voice were steady.

Tobe Bainter, dark and lean-jawed, played calmly, but with deadly intentness. The pile of winnings in front of him mounted, though for a while luck didn't seem to display any partiality. Sabin and Bainter raked in an almost equal number of pots. The money of the other four players was being rapidly depleted.

Then the Goddess of Chance smiled on Bainter. Winning hands began to come to him steadily. Across the table, Sabin's face grew darker and darker. He began to curse under his breath.

Bainter heard the piano again, and the Mexican girl started to sing. Hearing her, Sabin suddenly grinned. He turned half around in his chair.

"Maria!" he called. "Maria!"

Bainter watched the girl approach, wondering what this meant. He took advantage of the moment's interruption to calculate, mentally, the amount of his winnings. He smiled faintly when he found he had exceeded his goal. But his smile faded as he realized that winning was not all. He still had to get out with the money. From all appearances, that might not be so easy. The look on Sabin's face was becoming increasingly ugly. And men drifting around the table appear to have no good intentions.

The dark-skinned girl came up and stopped at the table.

"Maria," said Sabin, "sing that song for me—you know the one I mean. That old Mexican love-song. It always brings me luck. Now don't be jealous, José," he chided the black-haired Mexican who stood near the singer, the one Bainter had noticed before at the piano. "Everyone knows Maria's yore lady-friend. Go on, Maria—sing." He turned back to the table. "All right," he told the dealer.

At a nod from José, the girl began to sing, a plaintive melody. But it did Sabin no good, for he lost another pot.

"Stop!" he shouted at her. "Yuh're blastin' my ears with that cussed song. Get away from here."

The girl stopped abruptly, surprise, fear in her face. As she drew back, her fiancé José, pushed forward, eyes aglitter. Slim, small-boned, he fronted Sabin.

"Senor," he announced stiffly, "you have insulted Maria. You must apologize."

Bainter edged back slightly from the table. He recognized the signs. The blow-up was riding an ill wind and coming fast.

Splotches appeared on Sabin's face as he faced the young Mexican. A sneer crossed his lips.

"Yuh cussed Mexican!" he cried. "If yuh wasn't Harris' nephew I'd throw yuh through the window."

"The apology!" the Mexican insisted shrilly.

Suddenly Sabin's temper snapped. He flung back, rose, seized José by the collar and began to shake him savagely. All of the night's disappointments had suddenly found a focus, an outlet.

Then things began to happen fast.

Maria rushed in and began to beat Sabin on the shoulders, trying to make him release José. He flung her off and she staggered back, almost falling.

Suddenly, a hand of steel gripped Sabin's arm, broke his choking grasp on the Mexican and whirled him completely around. The Mexican, purple-faced, reeled aside and collapsed into a chair.

For an instant, Sabin stood speechless. Then he went berserk. But his opponent was ready for him, and actually laughing with savage pleasure as Sabin charged down on him.

Bainter had risen simultaneously with Sabin, whipped his winnings into his sombrero and handed it quickly to Hardtack behind him. Then he slipped his gun into leather and took a hand in the fray.

With pantherish grace he sidestepped Sabin's lunge, slipped speedily behind him, brought his boot up against the small of Sabin's back, and shoved hard.

With the roar of a bull, and with a momentum supplied first by his own initial surge, then with the forceful thrust of a boot scientifically applied, Sabin hurtled through the room, smashing tables and chairs, plowing through groups of men and finally crashing head-on into the bar, shaking it from end to end.

HE AROSE dazed, hung on to the bar with one arm, shook his head to clear it. Then he saw his opponent, walking slowly toward him through the debris. With a half-strangled cry, he seized a whisky bottle, raised it menacingly and shoved forward.

With cool deliberation, Bainter drew and shot the bottle to splinters, leaving only the neck in Sabin's hand.

"Throw the rest away, Colonel," Bainter ordered coldly. "Or I'll put a hole through yore hand."

Hastily, Sabin dropped the bottle neck. Bainter restored the gun to holster.

"Should we let him have it, Boss?" a harsh voice called suddenly.

Bainter turned slightly, flushed. He had missed a trick. The speaker was the bearded card player called Mike, whose place Sabin had taken. There was a vicious-looking gun in his fist. And around the room, drawing a tight circle about the two, were a hard, tough-looking crew.

Hardtack was also inside the circle. The hawk-eyed orderly was watching events intently, his elbows drawn back, his body bent forward. Bainter caught Hardtack's attention, shook his head slightly. Then he sneered deliberately at Sabin, knowing it would infuriate him.

"No!" roared the burly man. "Leave this hombre to me. I'll learn him to play smart with Del Sabin!"

The crowd had drawn back, leaving a clear space in the center of the room. Once again Sabin charged, arms flailing. Bainter ducked and flicked his fist into Sabin's jaw. The blow didn't seem to carry much power, for it started from the elbow. But it snapped Sabin's head back and the click of his teeth driven together could be heard through the room. He bellowed.

Then Sabin was on his opponent, sending smashing, sledge-hammer blows through Bainter's guard, cutting, hitting, driving. A hamlike fist caught Bainter on the side of the face, staggering him, almost sending him to his knees. He leaped aside as Sabin aimed a kick at him and drove a balled iron fist crashing against Sabin's ear.

Off balance, Sabin smashed to the floor. The room shook as he landed. Muttering imprecations, he scrambled to his feet and launched a furious fusillade of blows at Bainter.

Bainter took a blow on his shoulder, leaned in and sank his fist into Sabin's midriff. For the first time, Bainter heard Sabin grunt. Giving the heavy, pig-eyed man no time to recover, Bainter feinted down Sabin's guard and drove two more hard, rapid blows into Sabin's belly.

The burly man gasped for breath, eyes popping. Pumping away at Sabin's belly like a set of pistons, Bainter suddenly ducked as Sabin launched a terrific haymaker. It was a tremendous wallop and had it landed would have settled matters. But Bainter flashed up under it and unleashed a dynamite-packed fist that traveled too fast to be seen, and landed smack on Sabin's jaw.

The report sounded through the saloon like the whip-end crack of a mule-driver's lash. Sabin suddenly seemed to teeter on his toes and a faint expression of surprise showed in his eyes. Then he sagged at the knees, buckled and crumbled to the floor—out cold.

Sharp cries of surprise were wrenched

from the crowd. But then they changed to mutters of menace. Bainter had seen that coming before, and could do nothing to prevent it now. For, as he stepped back, his fist still aching with the contact of Sabin's jaw, he looked into an ominous circle of six-shooters—leveled at him and Hardtack. Guns in the hands of the men who called Sabin "Boss."

"What'll we do with this gent, boys?" demanded Mike.

"Nothin'."

The voice sounded lonely in the room as it echoed up to the ceiling and rolled against the walls. As one man, the crowd turned to the source of the voice.

It belonged to a man standing at the batwings, a man with a weather-beaten face, battered Stetson—and a star pinned to his left breast pocket. It glinted as it caught the light of the lamps. There was a gun in his holster, but his hands were busy with the makings.

"Sheriff Walters!" someone muttered.

"You two," drawled the lawman, nodding at Bainter and Hardtack. "Understand yuh been makin' a rumpus. Don't allow it in Winton. Reckon I'll have to take yuh into custody. Come on."

Reluctantly, a lane opened in the crowd, permitting the two men to pass through. The sheriff held the door open for them and they stepped out onto the porch.

"Foller me," said the lawman.

OBEDIENTLY, the two men followed him down the dusty main street. The blackened ruins of the fire, Bainter noticed, were still smoking, and an occasional live tongue of flame would hiss at the night air.

They were cutting across to the opposite side when a shadow detached itself from a darkened building and glided out toward them. In the clear light of the half-moon, Bainter saw that it was the Mexican, José.

"Senor."

"Yes, José?" He could barely make out the dark face under the hat-brim. Only two eyes glittered.

"The *Americano* has done Joe Hernando a great favor. He will not forget."

"That's all right, José," said Bainter. "Is yore lady-friend all right?"

"Si. Mille gracias. A million thanks. *Buenas noches, senores."* And he was gone, as silently as he had come. In a moment, the shadows had swallowed him.

As the door of the adobe calaboose swung shut behind Bainter a grin curved his lips. He seized Sheriff Walters outstretched hand and shook it.

"How are yuh, Tobe?" said the lawman, grinning back.

"Howdy, Sheriff," said Bainter warmly. "Yuh shore dug us out of a tight. Hardtack, meet Sheriff Jud Walters, one of the best friends I ever had."

"Got to keep law and order respected in this town," declared the sheriff, nodding at the orderly. "Every once in a while . . . Seen yore Aunt Martha yet, Tobe?"

"No," replied Bainter. "Just got into town. How is she?"

"Fine," replied the grizzled lawdog. "Was out that way tonight. That's why I missed the fire." He hesitated. "She's kinda worried about yore Uncle Jim."

Bainter's face darkened. "Uncle Jim's dead," he said soberly.

"How do yuh know?" demanded Sheriff Walters startled.

Briefly, Bainter told him.

The lawman shook his head. "Aunt Martha's goin' to take this hard," he said slowly. "Jim Reardon was a good man. Kind of hard to get along with, but honest. Drat them Comanches, an' Mexican traders!" He shook his head again. "Reckon this means yore aunt's goin' to lose the Rockin' R also, Tobe."

"Not for a while she ain't," said Bainter, smiling faintly. "Hardtack, empty my hat on the desk."

Sheriff Walters' eyes widened when Hardtack complied. He looked quizzically at Bainter.

"Aunt Martha told me yuh was a lieutenant at Fort Burns," he said. "Didn't know they make that kind of pay."

"They don't," said Bainter. "An hombre by the name of Sabin and some of his pards decided—without knowing it—to help pay off Uncle Jim's note on the bank here. Specially when I showed 'em the cards I held."

For a moment the sheriff stared at Bainter, then he threw his head back and began to laugh. He laughed until the tears rolled down his weathered face.

Hardtack looked puzzedly at Bainter, who shrugged.

"What's the joke, Sheriff?" Bainter asked.

"Wait until Harris learns how the note was paid!" chortled the lawman, still shaking with laughter.

"Harris?" said Bainter, forehead wrinkling. "I've been hearin' that hombre's name all around tonight. What's he got to do with it?"

Abruptly the sheriff stopped laughing. "Harris *is* the Bank. And Sabin's his top man. So yuh're payin' off yore Uncle Jim's note with money that came from Harris."

Bainter chuckled briefly. "Harris own a spread too?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. A couple."

"Them gents in the saloon workin' for him?" Bainter wanted to know.

"Most of 'em."

"Thought I saw a lot of new faces."

"Things have changed a bit, Tobe, since yuh hightailed out of here," the sheriff said.

"Who's this hombre Harris?" asked Bainter.

SHERIFF WALTERS shrugged his bony shoulders. He pushed his battered Stetson back on his head and rocked his chair back against the desk.

"Don't know much about him, Tobe," he confessed. "Except he's the richest man in the Basin. Came here about four-five years ago and bought the general store from Dan Winters. After a time he began to buy other property in the town—saloon and so on. Don't know where he got the money. General stores ain't bonanzas. Then he opened his bank. First, he gave plenty of credit. Then, about a year ago, when things wasn't goin' so good for the cowmen in the Basin, 'count of the Comanchero trade increasin' an' sending the Comanches raidin', he stopped givin' credit."

"Why?"

"Don't know," the lawman said laconically. "Said it was eatin' into his cash reserves. Mebbe it was. Anyhow, there ain't a cowman in the Basin that don't owe Harris money. And he been callin' on 'em lately to pony up. They can't meet the notes, so he's foreclosin' on 'em, drat him! But he's got the law on his side. And he shore picked up a couple of spreads cheap. Last one he got was Taylor's Box T."

"Ed Taylor?" demanded Bainter.

"Yeah. Know him? He come to the Basin after yuh'd gone. Comanches got him few weeks ago."

"No," said Bainter slowly. "Just saw his name on a bill of sale once." He didn't explain. "How long since Harris took over the Box T?"

"Not long," replied the lawman. "About three-four weeks. But he ain't taken it over yet."

"Why not?"

Sheriff Walters regarded him quizzically. "How come all these questions, Tobe?"

"Just curious," Bainter said noncommitally.

"Well," drawled the sheriff, "Taylor had a daughter—"

"Enough said," said Bainter.

"Can't say too much about Jane," Sheriff Walters said positively, then went on: "Well, what with Harris beginnin' to squeeze 'em, and with the Comanches blockadin' the Hosshead trail, the Basin men are gettin' kind of nervous. Holdin' a meetin' tomorrer night to talk 'bout a pool-herd."

"Where'd Harris get the 'Major' from?" asked Bainter.

"Heard tell he was in the war for a spell."

"Well," declared Bainter, "reckon I'll drop in to pay the Major on Uncle Jim's note tomorrer mornin'. Where yuh keepin' us in custody tonight, Sheriff?" He grinned.

"First two cells," replied the lawman. "An' make shore yuh don't break out till mornin'."

CHAPTER VII

Major Harris

MORNING sun made a crosscross pattern as it filtered into the cell and wandered over Bainter's body, finally coming to rest on his face. It woke him.

For a moment he lay there puzzled, then realized where he was. He arose, kicked the stiffness out of his legs. Four blistering days in the saddle, plus working on a bucket brigade, plus an encounter with a Mr. Sabin, had left soreness in his muscles.

A deep sonorous snore issued from the adjoining cell.

"Hardtack!" Bainter called. "Get up. We overslept."

Hardtack Johnson stirred, rubbed his eyes, and sat up on the bunk.

"Hey," he said grinning. "I ain't been in one of these for a long time."

Bainter nodded. He knew Hardtack's story. In a moment of confidence, the taciturn, hawk-eyed orderly had told Bainter that he had killed the man who had run off with his wife. Put in jail, he was given an opportunity for freedom by fighting in the Army. After the war he had been granted a full pardon, but had remained a soldier instead of returning to his forty and found.

They found Sheriff Walters in the outside

office. He had just come in and was fixing a pot of coffee on the small coal-burning stove. When he turned, they saw that his face was grim.

"What's up, Sheriff?" asked Bainter.

"Cal Raven was in his store when it burned down last night," replied the lawman, bleakly.

"That's what that feller Benson said," declared Bainter.

"Oh! You must be the two hombres Benson said tried to put the fire out."

"Yeah," admitted Bainter. "But it was too far gone."

"But we put Del Sabin's fire out," said Hardtack, his face wrinkling in a smile.

"A bad hombre, Tobe," said the sheriff. "Folks are tellin' how yuh stood up aginst him. First time, they say, anybody took the play away from Sabin. Twice in the same night, too. Mebbe yuh're stirrin' up things that better be left alone, Tobe. They're a mean, tough crew."

Bainter shrugged. "Just keep it mum, Sheriff, that I'm still in the Army. Mebbe the Colonel wouldn't like it so much if he heard I was tryin' to put a fire out."

The lawman nodded. "Benson—he's Winton's printer—claims the fire was no accident," he said.

"No?" Bainter recalled the half-menacing atmosphere of this town, the hint of dark things he could not grasp or touch. "He got any proof?" he asked.

"No," said the lawman. "But he says Raven was a mighty careful hombre."

"Accidents happen," Bainter said.

"Yeah."

Bainter stepped into the sun-warmed street, with the taste of coffee still strong in his mouth. He glanced the length of the main street. Except for the charred remains of Raven's general store, the town looked pretty much the same as he recalled it. There was, of course, the adobe bank building which was new, and a new sign up over a store reading, "Claim Commissioner." But otherwise he could have walked down the street five years back and seen nothing different.

He and Hardtack stepped into the bank, into a cool corridor lined by four grilled windows—two on each side. At the end of the corridor, was an office.

The bank seemed deserted and Bainter strode down toward the office door, Hardtack following. As he passed the second window on his right, he saw a stoop-shouldered man with a green shade over his eyes, sitting there. The sign on the grilled window read "Teller."

Bainted halted. The man looked up suddenly—evidently he hadn't heard the door open—and slid the paper from which he seemed to be copying something, underneath the desk. A shadow passed over his pasty face with a thin, colorless mustache. And this man's nervous tension fitted with the rest of the town.

"Yes?" he said harshly.

"Came to see Major Harris," Bainter said.

"Major Harris?" The teller's voice remained harsh. "Who should I say it is?"

"He don't know me," Bainter said. "Just say Jim Reardon's nephew."

The teller slipped out of his high chair. As he did, he pulled with him, seemingly by accident, the paper on which he had been writing. From the brief glance that Bainter obtained of it, it seemed to contain a long list of names.

IN a couple of minutes the teller returned. "All right," he said, "you can go in."

Bainter lingered. "Were yuh ever in Kansas City?" he asked.

"No," said the teller stiffly. "Why?"

"Thought I saw yuh there," said Bainter. He smiled. "Reckon I was wrong."

"Yes," declared the teller coldly. "You are wrong. I come from Chicago."

Lieutenant Bainter sauntered on into the office. For a moment, the man at the desk there did not look up, and Bainter had a chance to size up the "richest man in the Basin."

Major Web Harris was a distinguished-looking man. About forty-five, Bainter judged, for his thick black hair was graying at the temples. He wore a black frock-coat with long tails and a black flowing tie against a spotless white shirt. He was obviously a meticulous dresser.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said pleasantly, suavely, as he looked up. "What can I do for you?"

His blue eyes that gazed at them frankly were set perhaps a trifle too close together. But his nose was well-formed, almost Roman, and his mouth was strong, despite a thin upper lip.

"Howdy, Major," said Bainter. "I'm Jim Reardon's nephew and—"

"Sorry I haven't much time this morning," the Major interrupted. "I believe I can guess what you came for. An extension on your uncle's note?"

"Well—" began Bainter.

"I'm sorry, young man," declared the Major. He appeared genuinely distressed. "But I can't grant the extension at this time."

"Yuh got me wrong, Major," Bainter said. "I came to pay the note."

He withdrew the money which he had tied up in a kerchief, untied the knot and poured it out on the desk. Looking up, he surprised a curious, untranslatable expression in the Major's blue eyes.

"Five hundred—all here," he declared. Now if yuh'll mark this 'paid'—" He held out the note.

"Certainly, young man," said the Major heartily. He took up the desk quill, dipped it into the ink with a flourish, and signed the note. "I'm delighted that your uncle was able to pay."

"My uncle is dead," said Bainter slowly.

Concern spread over the Major's face.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "Then how did you manage to get this money?"

"Last night a generous gent by the name of Del Sabin decided to contribute in a good cause," drawled Bainter.

The swift-moving, dangerous life Bainter had led had made him perceptive of the creak of the wind, of water flowing over an obstruction, of half-prints in shifting sand—of the change in men. He was conscious here of a change in this man. Somewhere. Somehow. Bainter may have known that instinctively from the leisurely—too leisurely—way the man reached out for a paperweight.

"Oh," said the Major, suddenly smiling expansively. "It was you who was in that game last night, and the man who had some words with Del about putting out the fire?"

"Yeah," admitted Bainter. Suddenly he knew it was Harris who had called to Sabin at the fire.

"If I were you, young man," declared Harris affably, "I wouldn't interfere with things that don't concern me."

"It's kind of hard to stand by," Bainter said evenly, "when somebody yells there's a man in that burnin' store."

"Oh, Benson," said the Major. He smiled pityingly. "Nobody pays any attention to him. He's a little touched in the head."

"Touched or not," Bainter said, "they found Raven's charred body there this mornin'."

Again a swift warning flowed through Bainter. But there was nothing on which to fasten his suspicions this time. The fastidiously dress man seated at the desk only looked surprised, pained.

"Is that so?" said the Major. "It will be a great loss. Well, gentlemen—" He stood up. Standing, he was a shortish man, slightly stout, but well preserved. "I must ask you to excuse me now."

He extended his hand. Bainter took it. It felt cold and clammy in his grasp. As the Lieutenant and Hardtack went through the door, the Major called:

"Oh yes. I sent Sabin out to the Rocking R, but you can tell him not to bother."

Bainter and Hardtack got their horses, and at once set out for their ride across the range.

As they jogged along under the warming sun it rose higher and higher in a clear blue crystal sky. Ahead of them stretched the rich, luxuriant rangeland. To the east, circling the Basin, towered the Elbow Range, glistening with snow on its craggy, massive peaks.

"The Rockin' R," murmured Bainter when they had ridden in silence for a time.

AHEAD, through a span of cottonwoods, he discerned a familiar clump of buildings. A lump stuck in his throat. They had come up from the rear, but it did not matter. There was the big, white rambling ranchhouse, the squat barn, the L-shaped bunkhouse, the corral. Here was where he had grown up. Unconsciously he quickened the pace of his horse.

The horses moved almost noiselessly in the deep grass. In a few minutes they left the cottonwoods and entered the back yard. They slipped the horses' reins over a bush and moved around toward the front of the house.

Suddenly a murmur of angry voices reached Bainter. He pulled up short, listening, then frowning. One of the voices sounded familiar. Then he recognized the rough, strident tones of Del Sabin's voice. It became distinct, as Bainter moved forward again.

"Come on, Freckle-face!" he heard Sabin shout. "Get that stuff in there. We can't wait all day for yuh."

Then Bainter heard the clear, dry voice of his Aunt Martha.

"If I were a man, Sabin," she cried, "you would never carry this through. I'm sure Major Harris wouldn't permit it."

The loud guffaw of raspy voices arose.

Bainter reached the corner of the house. Quietly, he glanced out. The little scar on his left temple suddenly began to glow red as the meaning of the scene became clear.

His lips drew back, showing his teeth. His gray eyes became the color of the green, icy sea.

In the court-yard before him, a thin, gap-toothed puncher was loading an open wagon with house furnishing and clothing that he was carrying from the house. Prodding him was Del Sabin and four or five gun-heeled, rough-looking riders. Two of them Bainter recognized from having seen them the night before.

On the lowest step of the porch stood his Aunt Martha. Her back was turned so that he could not see her face.

"Sabin!" Bainter's voice lashed out like a branch snapping in a windstorm.

He moved slowly forward. Like the figures in a tableau, the motion of everyone in the yard suddenly died.

"Tobe!" That was his aunt.

But Bainter's gaze remained fixed on the big burly man.

"The note has been paid!" he cried. "Take yore pards and get!"

Sabin's bruised and puffy face purpled. His small eyes reddened.

"Why, you—" he began, and with a spinning motion dived for his guns. They were almost clear of leather when his arms went dead, as if they had hit an obstruction. And then his guns slipped back into their holsters.

Gaping at him, deadly, menacing, was a big black Colt in Bainter's fist. Hunched forward like a hawk waiting to swoop, his right elbow hinged at his side, Bainter, watching Sabin grimly through narrowed eyes, had gone for his gun in a blur of speed. A brittle, mocking laugh issued from between his thinned lips.

"You gents movin' or do I have to persuade yuh?" Bainter said.

"We'll move, blast yuh!" snarled Sabin savagely. "Come on, boys!" He twisted in the saddle. Suddenly his voice rose in a triumphant scream. "Get him, Jim!"

He shifted his body to one side, exposing a gun in the hand of the rider behind him. A wolf-faced man hidden behind Sabin had stealthily drawn. His gun blasted. Two shots echoed as one.

Bainter, his eyes intent on Sabin's face, had seen the sudden change in the man's eyes, and it had been a warning. As the gunny's pistol came into sight, he had lunged to a side, triggering his Colt. Gun roar filled the ranch-yard.

An involuntary gasp of pain came from Bainter's lips as lead scored his left shoulder. He came up steady, smoking gun in hand.

Across the ranch-yard, the man called Jim suddenly stiffened in the saddle. A convulsive shudder seized him. He twitched, fell forward across the neck of his mount and crumbled to the earth. The gun slipped from his nerveless fingers and he sprawled lifeless on the ground, blood gushing from a small hole above his heart.

"Hardtack!" Bainter called. "Relieve the gents of their guns."

"Yuh'll pay for this!" gritted Sabin, his face contorted into a grimace of hatred.

"Yuh keep repeatin' yoreself, Colonel," drawled Bainter, smiling faintly. "Yuh ought to learn a new speech."

SABIN ground his teeth in helpless rage as Hardtack moved among the gunnies, removed their guns and tossed them near the wagon, where Slim Cutler stood, relishing the situation.

"Now pick up yore pard," said Bainter, "and hit the dust."

In a moment, Sabin's men, packing their dead companion over his horse, rode out of the court-yard.

"Howdy, Aunt Martha," Bainter said then, grinning widely.

"Tobe, you're hurt!" she cried.

"Just a scratch," he told her.

Martha Reardon was a small woman, with calm gray eyes like those of her nephew, and with age wrinkles just beginning to form. She wore a plain calico dress of light blue. It made her look spry and chipper despite the plentiful streaks of gray in her hair.

After Bainter had greeted his old riding mate, "Slim" Cutler, and introduced Hardtack to his aunt, he told her that he had paid the note.

"You saw your Uncle Jim?" demanded his aunt, a curious look on her face.

"Yes, Aunt Martha," said Bainter. He swallowed hard and evaded her gaze. He put his arm around her shoulder. "Let's go inside."

They went up the steps.

"Slim," said Martha Reardon, to the freckled puncher, "when you get through bringing the things back in, take the buckboard and fetch Jane Taylor. She's comin' to live with us."

"Ed Taylor's daughter?" Bainter said.

"Yes," she replied.

"I'll take the buckboard when yuh get through, Slim," declared Bainter.

Then he went inside with his aunt.

CHAPTER VIII

The Meeting

BAINTER drove the swaying buckboard, drawn by a pair of mustangs, along the dim prairie road pointed out by his aunt. He grimaced as the rear wheel hit a boulder and jounced him. His left shoulder was sore.

The bullet had passed through the fleshy part and come out. His aunt had treated the wound and bandaged it, and while she had been busy with it, he had broken the news to her.

She had taken it bravely, with only a clenched, white-drawn fist, a tear welling in the corner of her eye, a slight trembling spell that was all. She had listened quietly while he told her all he knew.

She had sat with her head bowed for a few moments, then she looked up, her face wan, but shoulders unbent.

"I have some kin back in Kansas," she said slowly, "but I guess Jim would want me to stay on."

"Shore," Bainter had cried. "I'll quit the Army. Be glad to," he lied.

She shook her head vigorously. "No, Tobe," she said firmly. "You love the Army too much. You stay put. I'll manage."

"Well," he had said finally, "I'll make shore the spread remains yores, first."

Her face fell. "Jim never told me," she said. "But I think there was one more note he had to meet next month. But I'm sure Major Harris will wait if I ask him."

"Shore," he said dubiously.

Well, there were still three weeks of his furlough remaining. Many things could happen in that time.

Before long, as he drove on, an expanse of ranch buildings loomed half a mile ahead. The Taylor spread, thought Bainter, with quickening interest. In the back of his mind lay the memory of the signature on Juan Pancho's bill of sale, "Ed Taylor." Perhaps here he might find an answer to some of the questions that piece of paper had brought up.

There was another rig in the ranch-yard when he drove in. It was a handsome, leather-trimmed buckboard and the horses were well-matched and groomed.

"A particular gent," murmured Bainter.

Then his eyebrows arched and his lips pursed. On the side of the carriage in gold letters was the name "Major Web Harris."

"Right fancy," he muttered softly. Then he smiled faintly. "Bet the Major's come a-sparkin'."

Mounting the porch, he noticed several trunks standing there. He knocked on the door, waited. Receiving no answer, he entered. The sound of an argument smote his ears. Softly he trod the boards of the room and stood on the threshold of another. His gray eyes widened.

In the center of the room stood the Major, elegantly dressed. At arms' length was a dark-haired, slender girl. The Major was evidently pleading with her, for his face was flushed and his voice urgent.

"Jane," he was saying, "you don't have to leave the Box T."

"I'm afraid I do," she said coldly. "The only reason I stayed was the hope that Martin had been wrong—that my father would show up." Her voice became strained. "But Martin's dead and I've given up hope now. Father won't come back. Thank you for the extension of the note."

"Never mind the note!" exclaimed the Major, almost angrily. Then he recovered himself and his voice became suave, unctuous. "Jane dear, you must know how I feel about you. I want you to remain here. The Box T is yours. I give it to you."

"I'm sorry, Major Harris," said the girl. "I cannot accept it. I'm going to live with Aunt Martha."

The Major's voice cracked slightly, hoarsened. "I can't let you do it," he said, with determination. "Listen to me, Jane. I'm a wealthy man. Some day I'll own the whole Basin. It will all be yours."

She made a motion as if to turn aside. He seized her hand. "The Rocking R is mine, anyway. Reardon didn't pay his note."

"Then Aunt Martha and I will live somewhere else," said the girl, trying to pull her hand away. "Let go, please."

The Major became desperate. As his voice rose in pleading it sounded more like a woman's voice than a man's.

"I won't let you go!" He grasped Jane Taylor toward him. She struggled in his arms, but he was much stronger than she and now his triumphant laugh resounded through the room.

BAINTER was galvanized into action. For a bare instant he had stood tense,

tight-lipped, watching the girl struggle, and had almost broken into the room. But even as he moved, an inspiration struck him. He flashed a broad grin, whirled, tiptoed back to the door, opened it wide—then slammed it shut. The house trembled and echoed with the noise.

"Jane!" Bainter called loudly. "Jane, honey!"

He stalked through the room into the next as if searching for her, then pulled up, a delighted look coming to his face. The Major and the girl had moved apart and were watching the Lieutenant's entrance. Harris' face darkened as he recognized the intruder, but a look of perplexity came to the girl's eyes.

"Sweetheart!" cried Bainter, ignoring the Major.

Then, with the laughter lines crinkling on his face he swept across the room in giant strides, seized the girl in his arms, and smothered the startled cry that sprang to her red lips, with a kiss.

As their lips met, his left eye came down in a deliberate, obvious wink. He saw comprehension flood her face. She was beautiful, as he suddenly perceived, and as he bent down for another kiss, she pushed him away, laughingly, protestingly.

"Jim!" she cried, flushing prettily. "I have company. I'm so glad you're back—dear."

Bainter turned to the Major, his face beamingly innocent.

"Ha!" he cried gaily. "I'm shore the Major don't object to seein' a feller kiss his gal. Do yuh, Major? Bet he was young once himself, huh?" Grinning playfully, he dug his thumb into Harris' rather stout midriff.

The Major winced, his face thunderous with the angry blood that flooded it, his upper lip compressed into a thin, cruel line. He trembled with suppressed rage—and his suave manner had vanished.

"Excuse me, Miss Taylor," he said in that high-pitched, strained voice that emotion brought.

Without looking at Bainter, he strode across the room. They heard the door slam, and then the sound of horses hoofs thudding away.

"Wonder what's eatin' the Major, dear?" said Bainter, grinning, but the grin suddenly left his face as the girl slapped him across the cheek. In its place appeared the imprint of Jane's hand.

"That's for kissing me," she said coolly. Then she smiled. "But thanks for butting in."

"It was a pleasure," he said wryly, rubbing his cheek. There was something quick and alive in this girl that stirred him deeply.

Dimples appeared in Jane Taylor's bronzed cheeks when she smiled. And liquid pools of laughter lay beyond the surface of her eyes. Her teeth were even and white, and flashed like a mirror in the sun, when she spoke. She was lithe and slender and graceful.

"Who are you?" she asked, flushing under something his glance contained.

"I'd like to be that feller Jim," he replied, and saw the flush mount up to her cheeks. "But I'm Tobe Bainter, Aunt Martha's nephew. I've come to fetch yuh."

"But Major Harris said—" began Jane.

"The Major was lyin', Miss Taylor," said Bainter. "The note was paid this mornin' to the Major."

She shuddered, as if she had come into contact with something loathsome. . . .

Driving the buckboard slowly toward the Rocking R buildings, Bainter came around to the question he longed to ask.

"Miss Taylor," he said, "did yore father sell any cattle recently to a Mexican named Juan Pancho?"

She was surprised. "Juan Pancho?" She shook her head. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"I was at Fort Burns," replied Bainter, "when Senor Pancho brought five hundred head of cattle in, marked with the Box T brand—and a bill of sale signed with Ed Taylor's name."

"That's the herd my dad drove the last time he tried to cross the Staked Plains," she said. "I'm sure he didn't sell it to anyone. How could he?"

"That cussed Mexican!" muttered Bainter. Then he asked: "Yuh got a copy of yore father's signature? I'd like to show it to somebody."

Puzzled, she searched her pockets and came out with a piece of paper.

"An old note," she said, handing it to him.

"Thanks." Without glancing at it, he put it in his pocket. . . .

THERE was one man Bainter wanted to see at once—Chris Evers. He would see him that night, he knew, because it was at Evers' ranchhouse that the ranchers planned to have a get-together as to the best way to combat the elusive Comanchero. Bainter would drive his aunt there.

By the time he did drive the rig in which his aunt and himself headed for the Evers' ranch, past the grove of cottonwoods and into the ranch-yard, the story of the Basin

and its troubles was clear in his mind. His aunt had told him all the details.

It was a short, ugly story.

There were plenty of cattle in the Basin, but marketing them to the forts along the Pecos was barred by the Comanches, who were egged on and supplied by the Mexican traders—the Comancheros. At least by the one who operated in this vicinity, and kept the Basin ranchers fearful of the Staked Plains.

Appeal after appeal had been made to the authorities. Finally, a troop of cavalrymen had been sent. But it was inadequate. The men of the troop could patrol only a small section of the Border. Moreover, they were under order to protect the ranchers, not to act as an escort for herds.

Appeal had also been made for restitution from the Government. The Comanches were supposed to be wards of the Nation. Supposedly, if they stole from the ranchers, the cowmen should have a just claim. Yet they went to the courts in vain. And so far as the Claim Commissioner, Jess Haines, was concerned, the man whom the Government had sent to handle all their claims—all he did, it seemed, was to make reports and write letters. He had accomplished nothing, despite the fact that nearly fifty thousand dollars in claims had been filed with him by the Basin cattlemen.

Deprived of their natural market, except for an occasional herd that managed to get past the Comanches, the cowmen had mortgaged their ranches to the hilt. Their paper was being held by the Bank of Winton. Recently, the paper was being called in.

The ranchers had became nervous, desperate. Their homes were at stake now. Something *had* to be done! As a last resort, a pool herd had been proposed. Decision on it was to be made tonight, and details discussed.

The Evers ranchhouse was a blaze of light. Saddle horses and rigs were lined up in the yard. As Bainter helped his aunt down, he saw men moving about inside the curtained windows. The rumble of talk and the clink of spurs drifted out.

Coming through the door he recognized the faces of old friends—Chris Evers, Fred Webber, Ned Hawkes, and other cattlemen of the Basin. They were glad to see him and came over to shake hands—and to mutter condolences to his aunt. Evidently, Sheriff Walters, who nodded to him as he entered, had told of Jim Reardon's death at the hands of the Comanches. The lawman was speaking to a kindly-looking silver-haired man in the corner.

Again that feeling of change in the Basin assailed Bainter. Once these men had been stalwart, hearty, aggressive. Tonight there was a mixture of despair and frustration plain in their eyes. Backs were weighed with invisible burdens. It were as if a threat of impending doom hung over their heads.

Tobe Bainter knew that the unceasing vigil against the savage marauder, the inability to move their herds, and the dread of losing their homes was making their nerves raw. That made their faces look drawn in the lamplight.

Sheriff Walters and the silver-haired man with him approached Bainter.

"This is Jess Haines, the Claim Commissioner, Tobe," said the lawman.

Bainter shook hands with Haines. "Any luck, Commissioner?" he asked.

"Not yet," replied Haines, smiling. "But one of these days we're going to be pleasantly surprised."

"Shore hope so," said Bainter.

Indecision hung over the cowmen, and when Major Harris entered the room, Bainter saw the reason. They had been waiting for him.

Chris Evers, grim-faced, was up front. He nodded to the black-frocked, distinguished-looking banker.

"For the Major's benefit," declared Evers, "I'm goin' to repeat what's already been said here. Don't have to tell yuh, Major, that we're in a tight, and that it's make or break with us. The only chance we got is to get a herd past them killers on the Hosshead. If we do, I reckon we'll be in the clear. An' then mebbe we can buy back some of our paper from yuh."

"Don't worry about your debts, men," said Major Harris expansively. "I'm willing to play along with you, for a while. You've got to worry about getting your herd through."

A WAVE of hopeful talk swept the room. This had been one of their main fears —losing their homes.

"Why, that's mighty decent of yuh, Major," applauded Evers, beaming.

"Not at all," said the Major, deprecatingly. "How large a herd do you expect to trail?"

"About a thousand head, I reckon," replied the weather-beaten cowman.

"If you'd like my opinion, men," declared Major Harris, "two thousand would be a better figure."

"Why?" Ned Hawkes voice rustled like papers being rubbed together.

"As a kind of insurance," answered the Major. "In case the Comanches run off some of your cattle, you would still have a considerable number left."

"That's a good idea," declared, husky-voiced Fred Webber.

"Yeah—yeah," agreed others.

"That ain't such an all-fired good idea, gent," Bainter said. The cowmen turned to look at him in surprise. He smiled faintly. "Mebbe I don't have a right to butt in here, but I shore hate to see yuh get led plumb wrong."

"That's talkin' kind of rash, Tobe Bainter," reproved Evers, frowning.

"It's all right," said Major Harris slowly. "Let Mr. *Tobe* Bainter have his say."

"Mr. Tobe *Jim* Bainter, Major," said Bainter. "Well, in the first place men, beef is sellin' at eight cents a pound on the hoof at Fort Burns, and they're beggin' for it. Five hundred steers would net yuh a tidy sum. Second place, no reason why them Comanches can't run off two thousand head as easy as they can one thousand." The smile webs around his eye corners wrinkled. "Then again," he continued, "a small herd is easier to trail than a large one. Send some of yore shootin' cowboys along. Mebbe the Major'll lend yuh some of his gunslicks."

"What do you mean by that?" The Major was on his feet, his face flushed.

Bainter's eyebrows arched. "Nothin', Major," he said. "Nothin'. And another thing—yuh don't have to use the Hosshead route to get to Fort Burns. It's too long. There's a shorter trail."

"Where?" rasped Hawkes.

Every eye in the room was riveted on the lean-faced Texan.

"I passed by the fort five days ago," he said. "Headed directly west. Second night out my hoss near stepped into a canyon slicin' down into the sand."

"The Comanchero tradin' place!" breathed Chris Evers.

"Yeah, the Canyon of the Sands," said Bainter. "Two days later, I reached the Basin."

A tangle of excited talk ran through the room.

"Would you point the herd, Tobe?" asked Webber.

"Shore," answered Bainter. "Ridin' back that way anyhow. Got a line on the hombre I figger to be the Comanchero. Want to tell 'em at the fort. He brings his herds there."

"Who is he, Tobe?" demanded the lawman, from the corner of the room.

"A Mexican name of Juan Pancho," replied Bainter. "Operates out of a ranch the other side of the Border. Anybody know the gent?"

His glance swept them. Their faces were blank, surprised.

"Mighty serious charge, Mr. Bainter," said Major Harris. "Got any evidence?"

"Some," said Bainter. He tapped his breast pocket.

Later, Bainter drove his Aunt Martha home. They rode in silence for a while.

"Major Harris don't like you, Tobe," the spry little woman said, after a time.

"But that ain't why he left in a hurry, Aunt Martha," said Bainter. "He got kind of mad when they decided to let me point the pool herd across. Sort of personal insult to him."

"I hope it works out all right, Tobe," declared Martha Reardon. "They're afraid now he'll call their notes in." She hesitated. "I didn't know your middle name was Jim, Tobe. I didn't even know you had a middle name."

"I haven't, Aunt Martha," he replied, grinning widely. "A friend of the family baptized me with that name today—and by heck, I'm gettin' right fond of it."

CHAPTER IX

Disaster Trail

NIGHT had come again, and Bainter and Hardtack were far out on the Staked Plains, ahead of the heard that Evers so desperately hoped would cross the bleak and arid, sandy waste in safety. Both men had volunteered to go with Evers and his neighbors and their punchers in charge of the herd with Bainter, as had been arranged, riding point.

Now as darkness fell, they were riding some distance ahead of the main body and the cows, as look-outs.

The night was pitch-black. The flat moon had dipped behind cloud banks, and vanished. A hot wind had sprung up, rustling eerily across hot sands. There was a distant rattle of thunder which grew louder, like

an approaching artillery barrage. Ragged lines of lightning tore loose from the scabrous heavens, the brief glare revealing the desolate country through which the cattle were being driven.

"Storm a-brewin', Tobe," called Hardtack, reining over.

"Yeah." Bainter nodded. "And them dogies know it, too."

Behind them came the frightened bawls of the pounding herd, the clang of horns. The cries of riders chousing the cattle along rose to yelling, shouting.

In an incredibly short time, the desert storm was unleased with fierce, pelting fury. Rain boiled out of the torrential heavens, flooding the parched Plains. Tides of flood water washed away footings. The cloudburst drummed madly against the ground.

Bolts of flame lightning hurtled down on the bellowing herd. Havoc-wreaking bolts, live, leaped from horn to horn in the tossing sea of longhorns, sending them headlong in a blind stampede. Shrieking winds howled, blasted, tore.

"Hold 'em! Hold the herd!"

Over the rack and roar of the storm beat Chris Evers' yells to his men. Desperation was in his voice. It sent the punchers circling the herd like madmen, making death-defying turns on slippery, sodden ground. Weary, on the point of exhaustion from an unceasing, three-day grind, they nonetheless responded to the call of loyalty.

They knew the urgent necessity for getting this herd across, knew the fate of the Basin depended on it—and rode their hearts out.

Soaked to the skin, Bainter and Hardtack rode with them, battling the fear-crazed cattle. For a while it was nip and tuck. Then, as the force of the storm expended itself, control over the herd was regained.

Evers rode up, wheezing. "We're beddin' down for the rest of the night," he told them. "The boys are plumb wore out."

Camp was made. The lone chuck wagon was brought up and dry buffalo chips were taken to build the fire. Fatigued, bleary-eyed, the men sat around, gulping black coffee. Then they dropped into wet blanket rolls, asleep before their heads touched.

Bainter and Hardtack drew the first shift. They hesitated before the fire a moment before riding out.

"Yuh shore we're headin' right, Tobe?" asked Evers, his face strained, his eyes uncertain.

"Shore," Bainter said easily. "We ought to hit the Canyon by mornin'."

"The boys are beginnin' to say yuh don't know the trail," said Evers. "Or yuh're lost, or mebbe the Canyon was just a mirage?"

"The boys are tired," Bainter said quietly. "Don't worry, Evers. I know the way, and we ain't far from there now."

Topping their horses, they rode out to circle the herd, shivering in the chill night blasts that swept the desert, in the wake of the storm.

"No," murmured Bainter, "I ain't worried about that. But there are other things to worry about."

"Say, Tobe!" Hardtack's voice came nearer in the darkness. "S'pose we get there and find that hole filled with Injuns, or Mexicans?"

"We'll cross our bridges when we get to 'em," Bainter said.

But as he rode on in the inky night, he admitted to himself that it did trouble him. But there was something else which troubled him more—Major Web Harris.

Bainter had lived his twenty-five years close to the cutting edge of danger. When he had entered Winton, a few nights past, things had happened, like straws blown before a wind. He had recognized the presence of the wind, and knew from the scent of it that before long it would be whipped into a dangerous vortex, one in which the lives of the Basin cowmen would be drawn. And Major Harris was in the center of that vortex.

THAT night at the meeting the Lieutenant had read an underlying slyness in the banker's eyes—a sharpness. The man was a schemer, and therefore dangerous.

What worried Bainter now was the Major's sudden willingness to play along with the cowmen, when everybody knew he had been calling in the outstanding loans. Why the sudden reversal? What did the Major have up his sleeve?

He knew Harris wouldn't hesitate to lie if it was to his advantage. Just as he had lied to Jane Taylor about taking over the Rocking R when in fact, he was not. What did it all mean—lead to?

Bainter was half-dozing in the saddle when, with a start, he jerked himself erect. Clammy fingers tingled his spine. He was suddenly wide awake, listening with breathless intensity to the night sounds. Uncanny noises lifted with the wind. Eerie whispers rode the darkness. A surging warning of danger gripped him. He loosed his Colt in his holster.

Hardtack passed between him and the camp-fire.

"Do yuh hear it, Hardtack?" he said, in a low voice.

"Don't like it, Tobe," whispered the orderly. "There's a smell of gun-powder and death in the air. Just like that night at Gettysburg."

"Let's get back to camp," Bainter said. He turned his mount.

Suddenly, shadows swelled. The half-strangled whisper of sound welled up out of the outskirts of perdition. As Bainter gave a shout of warning, the night exploded in a burst of roaring gunfire.

Hideous cries filled the black void. The clatter of six-guns rose to an ear-splitting clamor. Flaming lead cut lurid, jagged edges out of the darkness.

Out of the murk charged yelling, shrieking Indians, guns firing, tomahawks whirling. Through the camp they plummeted, shooting, hacking, destroying—a tidal wave of death.

His lips a rigid line against gritted teeth, Bainter slammed forward, his gun flaming. Dimly aware that Hardtack raced at his side, he rode the stirrups, crying with rage. He crashed into camp, shooting at feathered figures.

A raider swooped past. Bainter fired. The raider tumbled, shrieking hideously. The Texan's bullet had found a mark.

"He's white!" cried Bainter as the dead man's headress was whipped off.

Then the universe exploded in Bainter's face, as a bolt crashed out of the night and landed with irresistible force on his skull. He slipped out of saddle, reeled forward a few steps, then collapsed into a black void. He knew no more. . . .

The first weak shafts of the morning sun were touching the rolling sands when Bainter recovered consciousness. He choked, gasped for breath. Something was pressing down on him, throttling him. He attempted to throw it off. It lifted, came up. He struggled to a sitting position. Then he saw what had covered him. It was the canvas hood of the wagon that lay on its side. The canvas had evidently billowed out and settled over him as he fell.

His head pounded furiously and there was an aching emptiness in the pit of his stomach. Dried blood matted his hair and was caked stiffly on his face. He raised a shaking hand to his head and grimaced with the sudden stab of pain as his fingers touched a shallow furrow just beyond his right ear.

"Creased," he muttered. "Half inch more and I'd be a dead soldier. Wonder if them killers got Hardtack and Evers—and the rest."

His ear-drums suddenly began to beat, as if something drummed against them. His dazed brain finally made it out to be shouting—Hardtack's voice. Bainter lurched to his feet, fighting back the rising nausea, and managed a weak shout. In the distance, blurrily, he could see Hardtack come scrambling out of a hole in the ground.

Bainter smiled wanly as the orderly approached. Hardtack's clothes were ripped and torn. His face was blood-streaked, his hat was gone, and there was a big lump on the side of his head.

"What happened to yuh?" Bainter asked.

"Fell into the Canyon," grunted Hardtack, scowling. "It's empty. Darn near busted my neck." He squinted at Bainter, grinned suddenly. "You don't look so healthy yoreself."

"I ain't," admitted Bainter. "So we were right on top of the Canyon and didn't know it?"

"Yeah," said Hardtack. "Boy, them redskins shore wrecked the place."

IT was so. The camp-fire site was strewn with wreckage and debris. The chuck-wagon was half-gutted from fire. Blanket rolls, camp equipment, saddles, lay scattered around. Bodies of dead cowpunchers were sprawled gruesomely.

"Them raiders were white, Hardtack," Bainter said grimly. "Not Comanches."

"What?" cried the wiry orderly in surprise. "Yuh shore, Tobe?"

In answer, Bainter pointed to a prone figure lying on its face. An Indian's headdress lay beside it. With the stub of his toe, Bainter turned the dead man over on his back.

"Holy cow!" cried Hardtack.

The dead man was definitely white, with an ugly scar twisting down the side of his face and disappearing into the thick clump of beard that blocked his chin. He was tough-looking, even in death.

Neither recognized him.

"Could be a renegade, or deserter, operatin' with them Comanches," suggested Hardtack.

"Yeah, could be," admitted the tall Texan.

There was also another possibility. But he rejected it as unlikely.

"Come on, Hardtack," he said. "We got a job to do, before them buzzards beat us to it."

Vultures, preparing for a macabre feast, were already circling in the sky.

The hot desert sun was wheeling up the

sky ladder when the two men had completed their grisly task. They stood back, wiping the sweat off their faces. Overhead, the disappointed birds of prey were drifting toward the horizon.

"Wonder what happened to Evers?" said Hardtack.

"Looks like he got away," murmured Bainter. "Shore hope so."

"Mebbe he's follerin' the herd," suggested the orderly, indicating the tracks the cattle had made.

"Them killers are trailin' the cows south," muttered Bainter, following for some distance the wide swath cut by the longhorns. A frown creased his forehead.

"Where in all get-out are our hosses?" demanded Hardtack, gazing about.

"Where would you go if yuh was thirsty and there was a canyon yonder with a river in it?" Bainter suggested dryly.

Hardtack grinned sheepishly.

They found their horses contentedly cropping grass in the Canyon. They washed in the cool river there, bathed their cuts and bruises, and soon were ready to leave.

"Look at this!" cried Hardtack suddenly.

He had found the blackened remains of a camp-fire, obviously not more than a day old. Two or three cigarette butts were lying around, and they saw the imprints of high boot heels.

Bainter kneeled and picked up a cigarette butt. He rose, his eyes narrowed.

"They were all white men," he said tightly, and feelingly.

They climbed into their saddles and rode up the trail to the mouth of the Canyon. Once more the arid, endless sands of the Staked Plains stretched before them.

"What way, Tobe?" asked Hardtack. "Do we trail the herd?"

Bainter shook his head. "Nope," he said thoughtfully. "We'll never catch it. Besides, I want to get back to the fort and see Colonel Chester."

Hardtack Johnson looked at Bainter questioningly, then shrugged, when no explanation was forthcoming. Through long experience he knew that he would have answers to his unasked questions soon enough. . . .

It was a long, hot dusty ride to which they set themselves. But finally the sandstone bluff, rearing high and awesome from the sandy flats, again loomed up ahead of them. Wearily they unsaddled their mounts and threw themselves down.

Evening shadows swifted across the barren ground, chased by the purple gloom of night. Darkness spread quickly like an enveloping blanket. Coyotes howled in the dunes. Overhead, a hoary moon crept slyly across the sky.

Bainter, unable to fall asleep, lay thinking. That the raiders had been white men was foremost in his thoughts. And to him it was obvious they had been lying in wait for the herd.

That meant they had known, in advance, that the plan to use the Horsehead route had been abandoned, and that the new trail past the Canyon was to be made.

Bainter tossed restlessly. A hundred questions hammered at his brain. How had they known in advance? Who were they? Who was their informant? Was the Mexican, Juan Pancho, involved? Was his band part white, part Mexican?

Bainter realized bitterly what the loss of the herd meant to the Basin cowmen. Blasted hopes, lost homes. Caustically he blamed himself. It was his fault, from beginning to end. If he hadn't interfered at the meeting, hadn't suggested the shorter route across the Plains, hadn't insisted that six men were enough, instead of the sixteen they wanted to send with the herd, this never would have happened.

He shook his head. No, it was not his fault. Sixteen men would have made no difference. What had happened would have happened anyhow. Someone in the Basin knew the cowmen's plans. The attack and raid would have been made no matter which trail the herd followed.

The stars wheeled across the heavens, shrank, dimmed. Finally, sleep claimed Lieutenant Bainter.

CHAPTER X

Money Changes Hands

IT WAS evening of the following day when Bainter and Hardtack reached the swirling Pecos. They camped under the stars that night, and were wakened by the blasting reveille of the Napolean six-pounder, fired from the fort walls. They were up in the saddle and riding, even as the echoing notes of the bugler sounded, followed by the infantry

drummer, "beating off."

Suddenly they saw Old Glory, floating in the morning breeze, then they swung into sight of the fort walls, just as a swirling dust-cloud announced the departure of a band of horsemen.

The riders were heading south, in the direction of the hog ranch.

Bainter experienced an unexpected thrill as he entered the parade grounds. There had been a time, long ago, when it had been his ambition to become a cowman, a rancher, with many herds and a big spread. But no longer. There was something about Army life that appealed to him more. It had been hard for him to tell his Aunt Martha that he would quit the Army. But he would have done it, for her sake, despite his love for Army life.

"Nice to be back, ain't it, Tobe?" said Hardtack.

"Shore is," agreed Bainter.

There was no answer when he knocked on Colonel Chester's door. A guard, patrolling the store-room immediately next door, yelled—

"The Colonel took his yellow-dogs out for a ride yesterday."

Bainter's gaze swept across the grounds to the officer's quarters. There was a lack of activity there that confirmed the sentry.

"Where'd they go?" he asked the guard.

"Chasin' Comanches," the soldier replied.

Bainter's face fell. There was no telling when the Colonel and the troop would be back. He entered the quartermaster's office in the store-room. The clerk, a small, bustling man with a bulbous red nose, came to meet them.

"About ten days ago," said Bainter, "Juan Pancho sold the fort five hundred head of Box T cattle. I want to see the original bill of sale."

The clerk hesitated. "I'm not sure, sir, that the Colonel would—"

Bainter cut him short. "I'll be responsible."

Shrugging, the clerk went into the next room.

"Didn't know cowmen leave their bills of sale here?" said Hardtack dubiously.

"They don't, as a rule," explained Bainter. "But with over-the-Border trade, the fort, to protect itself, makes 'em leave their original bill of sale."

The clerk returned with a large black box. Placing it on the desk, he opened it and

[Turn page]

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searched through a sheaf of papers. He finally extracted one and handed it to Bainter.

"Here it is, sir," he said. "Signed by Ed Taylor."

Smoothing it out on the desk, Bainter took from his pocket the old note that Jane Taylor had given him. He creased it along the signature and placed it directly under the one on the desk. Carefully he compared the two.

Deep furrows creased his brow. His underlip protruded.

"It can't be," he muttered. "Can't be." He glanced up. "Hardtack, take a look at these."

Curious-eyed, the wiry, weathered orderly bent over the desk. He studied the signatures, then straightened up.

"I don't see no difference in 'em, Tobe," he announced.

Bainter's lips thinned. "It don't make sense," he muttered. "Jane was certain her father never sold Pancho them cattle."

"Pancho?" the clerk interrupted. "Why Senor Pancho sold the fort another herd this morning. He left, just before you came in."

Bainter whirled, his eyes widening. "What brand? Who owned the herd before Pancho bought it. Let me see the bill of sale."

The clerk looked troubled. "I'm not familiar with brands, sir," he said. "I'm here only a short time from the East, you know. But I saw the brand. It had a curve in it —like this." His finger cut an arc in the air.

A sudden premonition seized Bainter. "What was the letter?" he snapped.

"An 'R', sir," replied the clerk.

"The Rockin' R!" cried Bainter savagely.

"Yes, sir," declared the clerk quickly. "That was it. And the bill of sale was signed by—Jim Reardon, I think. Wait, I'll find it for you." He dug into the black box again.

Cold fury possessed Bainter. Blood pounded in his ears, at his temples, ran red through the scar near his ear. His fists clenched white at his side.

THIS time there was no doubt. His uncle's herd had been run off by Comanches. If the Mexican, Pancho, had brought it here, then he was the Comanchero.

"Here it is, sir."

Bainter's hand trembled with his suppressed rage as he reached out to receive the paper from the clerk. Quickly he glanced at it. His gaze glued suddenly to the signature. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Wait!" he muttered.

Feverishly, he dug into his pocket again, and drew out his uncle's paid note, which he had neglected to give to his aunt.

Once more he laid the two signatures out on the desk, one under the other. Hot tears of anger suddenly flooded his blazing eyes. He brought his fist down smashing on the desk.

"It can't be!" he yelled hoarsely. "It's impossible!"

He paced the room like a cage puma, running his hand through his hair. The evidence was before him, but he refused to believe it.

"My uncle never signed that note!" he cried fiercely.

Hardtack, who had been examining the two signatures, turned.

"They're like two peas in a pod, Tobe."

Bainter stopped short, calmed. A tight grin suddenly spread across his face. But his eyes, turned a cold green, belied that grin. He picked up the four pieces of paper and jammed them into his pocket, before the clerk could object.

"Mebbe Senor Pancho knows the answer to that riddle," he cried. "I'll find out if I have to break every bone in his fat body."

He slammed through the door.

Waiting for nothing more, Bainter and Hardtack mounted their waiting horses, slashed through the fort entrance and the hoofs of their mounts beat the southward trail like thudding drums.

"Mebbe them sidewinders stopped at the hog ranch?" yelled Hardtack.

Bainter's only answer was to touch spurs to his mount and beat it across the flank with the flat of his hand. The animal bounded ahead, flashing through a stand of trees, then emerging in the clear.

A quarter of a mile down the trail was the hog ranch—the clapboard saloon to which the fort soldiers took their pay, to drink it away in one night's carousal.

Nearing the squat, elongated building, Bainter nodded grimly when he saw a half dozen horses standing at the tie-rail. He slackened his speed, and let Hardtack come up to him.

"Hardtack," he said, "I'm goin' in first. You drift in after me. Stay near the door, in case trouble breaks."

Hardtack flashed a wide grin. It was a long time since he enjoyed himself this way.

Bainter slid off his horse at the rail. He had calmed since his outbreak in the quartermaster's office, and his hand was steady. He smiled faintly, as he entered—a thin, tough smile.

It was a long and dank-smelling room; dark and gloomy, with the windows painted black. Little light came in from outside, and a lamp in the center shed a jaundiced glow.

The saloon, this early morning, was empty. Save for the bartender and those six greasy, hard-looking *vaqueros* at a table, with squat, chunky Juan Pancho in their midst. A bottle of *mescal* was passing from hand to hand. They didn't bother to look up as Bainter walked casually to the bar.

The bartender, a florid-faced, hulking man named Frank Wurt, recognized Bainter and muttered a greeting.

Bainter nodded. Wordlessly he ordered a drink and downed it at a gulp. Looking up into the back-bar mirror, he saw Hardtack enter silently and station himself near the door.

"Wurt!" Bainter's quiet, but commanding voice swung the big bartender around and fetched him forward. Softly the lean-jawed Texan spoke. "Wurt, ask Pancho to come up here. Tell him yuh want to show him somethin'."

Blood receded slowly from the bartender's ruddy countenance. He had seen the face of trouble before. Recognition came easy this time.

"Don't worry, Wurt," said Bainter, in the same tone. "I'll pay for the damage—if there is any."

Wurt's voice rasped anxiously through the gloom: "Say Pancho, come up here a minute. Want to show yuh somethin'."

The swart-skinned Mexican turned in his chair, squinted through the dim light. Shrugging, he arose and crossed the floor.

Bainter, leaning idly against the edge of the bar, turned slowly as the Mexican came up.

"Howdy, Pancho," he said.

SURPRISE flushed Pancho's face. He grinned, unpleasantly, his yellow, fang-like teeth showing.

"Senor Bainter." He scanned the Army man's range dress.

"I was wonderin'," Bainter said evenly, "if yuh know a gent by the name of Jim Reardon?"

For a hair-split second, a look of perplexity showed in Pancho's boarlike eyes. Then it was gone. A broad, smile wreathed his greasy face.

"Senor Reardon?" he exclaimed. "*Si.* The senor is a good friend of Juan Pancho. I buy cattle from him."

"Uh-huh." Bainter nodded. "Then I reckon yuh know he died about ten days ago?" Bainter's voice remained casual.

"*Sacre Dios!*" cried the Mexican, palpably surprised. He screwed up his face. "Senor Reardon dead? That is a great pity. He was a fine man."

"Yeah," said Bainter. "I bet yuh didn't know Jim Reardon was my uncle?" His eyelids were drawing together, his lips growing thin.

"Ah!" exclaimed Pancho, smiling.

Then suddenly the smile was gone. Something hidden, something uncertain remained. He threw a side glance at his men.

"Pancho," murmured Bainter, "when did yuh buy the Rockin' R herd yuh delivered to the fort this mornin'?"

Something definite came into the room—a pressure, tight, breathless. Bainter waited, taciturn in the yellow light.

"Let me see," said Pancho. He pushed a pudgy finger under his sombrero and scratched his head. "I buy them—" Suddenly he became angry, belligerent. "It is not your business!" he flung out, "when I buy them." Then he shrugged again and started to walk away.

"Pancho!" Bainter's voice snapped out, brittle, hard—a flaming warning. The Mexican's eyes were ugly. "Yuh onery sidewinder!" the Texans' voice lashed out at him. "Yuh never saw Jim Reardon in yore life—or Ed Taylor! Yuh bought their herds from the Comanches that killed 'em and ran off their cattle. Pancho, yuh're a lyin' Comanchero—and they're goin' to hang yuh at the fort!"

A pasty gray spread over the Mexican's swart face, then a surge of angry blood mottled it.

"Lying dog!" he roared, snatching at his guns.

At the table, his *vaqueros,* watching intently, were drawing with murderous purpose.

With a smile swiftly touching his lips, Tobe Bainter went for Colt in a heart-tick of flashing speed. His elbow went back in spring-like, clawing manner, and his hand plucked his gun from leather in a noiseless, blinding motion.

And even as Bainter drew, a voice rattled across the room from the door:

"Freeze, gents!"

It was Hardtack, covering the *vaqueros.* They slithered around abruptly at the sound of his voice—and let their guns slip back into holsters.

Juan Pancho drew in a hard breath, his

eyes popping. The black muzzle of a menacing Colt gaped at him from Bainter's steady hand.

Bainter slapped Pancho's hands away from their grip on the pearl-handled guns, pulled them out and tossed them on the bar. As he did, he heard the jingle of coins from the Mexican's vest. Inserting his hand into the pocket, he withdrew a heavy money-bag, jangling with coins.

"Thief! Pig! Dog!" Homocidal rage boiled in the Mexican. He gritted his teeth, gnashed them, fuming with anger.

"This belongs to Aunt Martha," Bainter said, grinning as he shoved the money-bag into his pocket. "Or mebbe this'll pay for the pool herd." A sudden frown corrugated his forehead.

If this Mexican *was* the Comanchero, then what about the band of killers that swooped out of the Canyon in the Sands to run off the Basin pool herd? Was there one organization, one outfit that had been split in two? Led by Juan Pancho?

"Say, Pancho," Bainter said, his gaze flicking the Mexican's face, "where are yore men takin' the pool herd yuh run off three nights ago at the Canyon?"

He spoke quickly, hoping to take Pancho by surprise. But the wily Mexican glared back at him, angry, vengeful.

"Pool herd?" he cried. "The hombre is loco! Juan Pancho knows nothing of a pool herd." He beat his chest with his fist. "I am a respectable trader."

There was a mixture of surprise and indignation in the Mexican's voice that caused a doubt to creep into Bainter's mind. Suppose Pancho had nothing to do with the running off of the pool herd? Well, that merely meant that another band of raiders was operating in the Staked Plains, as well as the Comanches. But Pancho remained the Comanchero—of that the Lieutenant was convinced.

But what about those two bills of sale, signed by Taylor and Bainter's own uncle? He couldn't just put them aside. They remained an awkward stumbling block.

THEN things began to happen in the room.

Unexpectedly, someone trying to enter the saloon, pushed the door in. It swung against Hardtack's shoulder, momentarily throwing him off balance. This was the break for which the dark-faced *vaqueros* were waiting. They scattered, diving for their guns.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bainter saw it happen. His Colt flicked up and exploded. The lone lamp in the saloon, shattered, went out, plunging the gloomy room into complete darkness.

He lunged aside—just in time. Leaden messengers of death plowed into the space he had just occupied. The room reverberated to the deafening din of gunfire.

Bainter kept moving, firing at flashes. A howl of pain rent the air, then the sound of a body falling. Then Bainter tripped over a chair, fell crashing to the floor. It undoubtedly saved him. Scarlet flame cut a swath over him.

"Kill the Yankee!" Pancho's frenzied voice crashed the darkness. On his hands and knees, Bainter crawled along the boards. Then he found what he wanted—a table. He pulled it down in front of him, to form a shield.

"Hardtack!" he shouted. "Get out and keep the front door closed. I'll join yuh in a minute."

Lead pellets slugged into the table, sent wood splinters flying into his face. Then, to give Hardtack a chance to make the break, he triggered his Colt. The gun bucked, roared. The barrel grew hot in his hand. Bullets sang a deadly tune as they sprayed the saloon.

A sudden, blinding shaft of light shot into the room an instant, then was gone, as Hardtack Johnson, taking advantage of the murderous barrage, slipped out.

Howls rose as the Mexicans realized that one of their prey had escaped. Grinning savagely, Bainter plunged the hot gun back into leather and snaked to the end of the bar. From there, the direction of a side window was firmly fixed in his mind.

"Follow him!" Pancho's voice roared.

There was a scraping sound as of someone crawling toward the door. Judging the sound, Bainter lifted the chair under his hand and tossed it. A yell rewarded him. Nevertheless, in a fraction of a moment, the door opened slightly, then was slammed shut as bullets from the outside crashed into it.

"The other hombre!" yelled Pancho frantically. "He is still here. He has the money. Do not let him get out! Miguel, the light!"

"Well," thought Bainter, "reckon here's where I make my exit."

Of a sudden, a match flared in the darkness.

"There he is!" screamed Pancho.

Bainter was moving swiftly, even as the Mexican yelled. Gun flashes bit into the darkness, bullets flagged around him. Then,

with a flying leap, Bainter crashed through the window, pulling the frame with him. He landed on his knees in a shower of glass.

For a moment, he was blinded by the sunlight, then scrambled to his feet and raced around the corner of the building. Hardtack, in his saddle, and with his gun trained on the saloon door, was holding his horse for him.

Bleeding from scratches on his face, Bainter leaped into leather.

"Let's move from here!" he cried.

CHAPTER XI

Framed

QUIRTING their mounts, Bainter and Hardtack headed north, back on the trail toward the fort.

"Holy cow!" ejaculated Hardtack suddenly. "The Colonel and the troop!"

About an eighth of a mile ahead, a group of yellow-legs had broken through the brush from the east and pulled up on the trail. The identity of the man riding at the head of the troop was unmistakable.

Bainter pulled up sharply.

"Can't run into the Colonel now," he said, "with a pack of Mexicans on my tail. And my goose would be cooked proper if the Colonel and Pancho got together. Come on, Hardtack, we're driftin'."

He threw a swift glance over his shoulder. The *vaqueros* were piling out of the hog ranch, shouting, running for their horses, triggering their guns.

Bainter wheeled his horse, breaking for the tangle of cottonwoods. Hardtack raced at his horse's heels. Beyond was cedar and piñon country, offering plenty of cover.

The Mexicans had taken up the chase, yelling their heads off. Bullets began to sing around them, flick at their clothes. A lead pellet ripped some skin off Bainter's thigh.

"Tobe!" yelled Hardtack from behind. "The Colonel and the boys are lookin' in on this."

Bainter twisted in the saddle, and the corners of his mouth webbed in a grin. Riding neatly in formation, the Ninth New Mexico Cavalry troop converged on them from the right. The situation appealed to him—his own friends chasing him.

Of course they didn't know it was he, yet. The distance was too great for recognition of two sand-plastered cowboys. But the Mexicans, with Juan Pancho at their head, converging on them from the left, would soon remedy that. Bainter's gray eyes mirrored his ironic amusement.

They gained the cover of the cottonwoods and swerved sharply, angling toward the foot hills. The sound of pursuit rose after them.

"They're on our tail, Tobe!" yelled the orderly. "Let me take the lead. I know a place."

With Hardtack setting the pace, they left the fringe of cottonwoods, raced across a clear stretch, then spurred up a slope where scrub cedar and piñon bushes offered hiding. Wheeling under a jutting rim, they tore over a rocky, boulder-strewn sweep. Slowing, Hardtack led the way up a slippery ledge, winding around and around until they were atop the rim.

They were safe here, behind the bushes, and could look down upon their pursuers with impunity. In a few moments, Pancho and his men thundered by under the rim.

"Found my way up here by accident one day," chortled Hardtack.

Bainter grinned back. But the grin faded when the troop dashed past. Then, in a few moments, Pancho came riding back, talking earnestly, gesticulating to Colonel Chester. Pancho's voice reached them.

"—and then your Lieutenant Bainter reaches into my pocket and takes my moneybag."

"By Harry!" Colonel Chester's voice rasped. "Bainter's gone too far this time. I'm going to—"

What the Colonel was going to do remained a mystery, for by now the two men below had walked their horses out of earshot. Bainter however, had a pretty clear idea of what more would be said.

"Well," he muttered, "shore looks like my goose *is* cooked."

Hardtack clucked sympathetically. "Why don't yuh just tell the Colonel that Pancho's a lyin', murderin' son?"

Bainter laughed shortly. "I did that once," he said. "And the Colonel asked for proof. This time I figgered I had it, but—" He shrugged.

He pulled out the two bills of sale, studied them, again comparing the signatures with those on the notes. They were identical. He shook his head and put them away, noting idly as he did, that the printing of the line

"Bill of Sale" was the same on both papers.

"Same printer probably," he muttered. "Taylor and my uncle Jim must have gone to the printer in Winton."

"What yuh aim to do, Tobe?" asked Hardtack.

"We're headin' back to the Basin," replied Bainter. "Got to give the Colonel time to cool off. Anyhow, I got some money I'd bet my last dollar belongs to the cowmen, and my aunt. I'm dead certain—even if my proof don't somehow make sense—that Pancho is the Comanchero. He's the one who keeps supplyin' the Injuns with guns and ammunition, so they keep raidin' and killin' in the Basin."

HARDTACK scratched his grizzled head. "But Pancho's here, Tobe—not in the Basin. If we're goin' to get proof on him, we won't find it in Winton."

Bainter nodded. "Yuh're right, Hardtack. But there's another reason we're goin' back. Them Basin cowmen are goin' to be desperate when they learn their herd's been run off. And our good friend"—he smiled acidly—"Major Harris is goin' to start collectin' their spreads if they can't pay him. And they can't—without the money I have here."

He tapped the bulge in his pocket. There was a further reason, but he didn't mention it.

"There's somethin' about that hombre Harris I don't exactly cotton to," said Hardtack.

"He wants to own the whole Basin," thought Bainter, a far-away look in his eyes. "And give it to her. But she didn't care nohow."

* * * * *

The scimitar moon was a silver silhouette against the cloud-shadowed valleys of the sky. It rode a soft-sighing night wind and sailed slowly across the curving Middle Concho Basin. The Elbow Range threw a somber frowning arm around the miles of rich spread, cradling it in shadow and darkness.

Little light was cast by the chipped moon, yet a vague, hoary glow, reflected from the sky, clung close to the earth. It defined objects in a queer, loose manner.

Bainter, Hardtack, topped the rim of the Basin. They drew rein. In the distance twinkled the familiar lights of Winton. Beyond, faintly, shone the light from one or two rancher's homes.

"Shore glad to get here," declared Hardtack. "Never been so fried in all my life."

Bainter nodded. They had pushed through the desert for four long days under a merciless, unrelenting sun. It had baked them dry.

"Let's get down there," he said.

About to pull on the reins, a prickly sensation raced down his spine. A danger signal was flashed to his brain. He whirled fast, going for his gun. But for once, Bainter was too late.

"Not so fast, gents," a lazy voice suddenly said, almost in his ear.

"Holy cat fish!" groaned Hardtack Johnson.

Behind him, Bainter saw five men, masked to the eyes. Guns filled their hands. They had apparently been standing their horses in the dark, under a nearby tree.

"What's the idea?" demanded Bainter, eyes narrowed.

"Curious gent, ain't he, boys?" a masked man who evidently was the leader, drawled. They laughed hoarsely. "We're just passin' through this way, hombre," he said to Bainter, "and figgered mebbe we could raise some cash on the road. All right, boys, look 'em over."

For a moment, Bainter thought of making a break for it. But his mount was weary, and there was enough light to make a good target of him.

Two of the masked riders searched him. They took his gun—and then one pulled out the money-bag. It made a jingling sound.

"Hey, look what I found!" yelled the discoverer.

The leader reined over and took it from him.

"We're playin' in luck, boys," he drawled. To Bainter he said, "Much obliged, hombre. You and yore pard can hit the trail now. And don't stop till yuh get to town. We won't like it if you do." He gestured with his gun.

Cursing, Bainter urged on his weary horse. Hardtack reined over at his side. They rode in silence.

A sense of failure oppressed Bainter. Somehow the responsibility, the burden had become his. It was on his say-so that the cowmen had taken the pool herd across. The herd was gone, but the money he carried would have compensated for it. Now the money was gone too. Again he cursed, but it brought him no relief. A hollow feeling lay at the pit of his stomach. His mouth felt dry.

When the two men rode through Winton, it was still fairly early, yet the main street seemed strangely deserted. A curious sense of urgency pressed on Bainter. And he was also troubled by a faint, half-knowledge that

everything that had happened was part of an over-all pattern.

They rode on out across the range, and soon the Rocking R buildings loomed up before them, the ranchhouse white, ghostlike in the night. Lights shone from the windows. They reined in and swung weary legs clear of cantle. Leaving their horses at the water trough, they stamped up the porch steps.

AS THEY did, the lithe, graceful figure of a girl appeared at the door. For an instant Bainter stared at her—and promptly shed the evening's disappointment as a duck sheds water. A gleam flashed in his gray eyes and the laugh lines across his face deepened. With one stride, he reached the girl and seized her in his arms.

"Katie, sweetheart!" he cried, and kissed her.

For a moment, the girl was too astonished to even cry out, and remained trembling in his arms. Then she recovered, whipped out of his embrace and brought the flat of her hand sharply across his face.

Bainter staggered back, crying out in pretended amazement:

"Katie, honey—it's Tobe. Don't yuh recognize yore . . . Heck!" He jerked off his sombrero, suddenly apologetic. "I'm sorry ma'am. Terrible mistake. Thought yuh was a girl I met in Kansas City."

Behind him, Hardtack snorted and fell into a fit of coughing.

"Tobe Bainter!" exclaimed the girl, startled. Her voice suddenly became cold, flat, unfriendly. "What are you doing here in the Basin—among honest people."

"Why, it's Jane Taylor," said Bainter in seeming surprise. "Ha! And I thought it was Katie . . . What did yuh say?" He frowned, puzzled at her strange words.

"You might have had the decency to stay away," Jane said bitterly, angrily. "Instead of bringing disgrace and shame to your aunt."

Bainter was thunderstruck. "What are yuh talkin' about?" he demanded.

He could now make out her face in the shadows. It was grim and her eyes sparkled with cold anger.

"Get out of my way!" she said.

But he barred her way, his lips taut. "Do I have to shake it out o' yuh, Jane?" he demanded fiercely. "Before yuh tell me what's goin' on here?"

"Tobe!"

Bainter suddenly saw his aunt in the doorway. Beneath his coat of sand and tan, he flushed deeply. Beside her stood Sheriff Walters. Both stared at him their eyes wide.

He mumbled an apology. "Sorry, Jane." His voice went husky when he saw her white face and burning dark eyes that seemed to probe his very soul. Then she walked past him without a word.

Silently Bainter followed his aunt and the lawman into the living room. Hardtack came after them. Nephew and aunt eyes each other. Martha Reardon's face had grown tired-looking, Bainter thought.

"What did she mean?" he demanded.

"Don't yuh know, Tobe?" asked Sheriff Walters slowly.

"Know what?" snapped Bainter. "What's this whole danged mystery that got yuh all talkin' in riddles?" His forehead wrinkled in deep furrows.

For one moment longer the sheriff searched Bainter's face, then he hitched his trousers up a notch.

"Tobe," he began quietly, "four days ago, old Chris Evers came reelin' into town—"

"Evers!" Bainter cried. "Figgered he got away. I'm mighty glad."

The lawman looked queerly at Bainter, then continued:

"He near cashed his chips. He was cut and bloody, and kept mumblin' yore name."

"My name?" asked Bainter, puzzled.

"Yeah," replied the sheriff. "Day later he got his mind back." He hesitated a moment. "Told us the pool herd was raided by white killers dressed like Injuns."

"That's right." Bainter nodded, his eyes riveted on the sheriff's face.

"Told us he keeled over in the shadders, just beyond the fire," resumed Sheriff Walters. "Then he heard one of the killers yell, 'Nice goin', Bainter. Brought 'em here just like yuh said yuh would'."

"What?" gasped Bainter. Then he stiffened. His jaw clamped into a hard, solid block, and his lips creased suddenly into a thin, single tight line. "Evers is ravin' mad," he gritted.

Sheriff Walters shook his head. "He's as sane as you or me, Tobe. And he swore on a stack of Bibles that's what he heard."

Bainter fell to pacing the floor in fierce, angry strides. They watched him out of the corners of their eyes. Then he stopped short before them, his jaw hard and tight and grim. He addressed his aunt.

"So the Basin folk figger yore nephew Tobe is a double-crossin', low-down owlhoot, workin' in cahoots with the Comanchero gang?"

Distress showed in her eyes. "Yes, Tobe,"

she quavered. "They're all het up. But I never believed it—and I don't now."

BAINTER'S expression softened momentarily. He took her worn hand in his and patted it.

"Thanks, Aunt Martha." Then he started as a thought struck him. "Yuh didn't tell 'em I was in the Army?"

Sheriff Walters and Martha Reardon shook their heads.

"No," said his aunt. "We didn't think it would help matters."

"Good," Bainter said briefly. "They don't have to know. It would only get me into hotter water." He saw the questioning look in their eyes, but didn't explain. "Let me ask yuh this," he said abruptly. "Did Evers say he saw me and them owlhoots talkin' together?"

Sheriff Walters thought a minute, then shook his head slowly.

"Don't believe he did, Tobe. Just said he heard it."

A faint, hard smile lurked at the corners of Bainter's mouth.

"Mebbe he didn't see me neither, or hear *me* talkin'?"

"No," said the lawman, pushing his battered Stetson back on his head. A puzzled look came to his blue eyes. "Reckon he didn't say anything about that."

Again Bainter paced the room swiftly, his face grim, dark. A thought was pushing up rapidly from the recesses of his brain. He felt it grow within him, bigger and bigger, explosively, hammering for outlet. Almost involuntarily, his lips formed the word:

"Framed!"

"Tell us what happened, Tobe?" asked his aunt.

Briefly, Bainter told them of the raid, how he almost had been buried alive under the canvas. He showed them the healing gash in his head, then told of the ride across the desert, the encounter with Juan Pancho, and finally of the stick-up outside of Winston.

"Yuh mean," demanded Sheriff Walters, his eyes widening, "this Mexican sold Fort Burns the Rockin' R herd that was run off by the Comanches on the Hosshead?"

"Yeah," declared Bainter. He dug into his pocket and brought out a paper. "This is the bill of sale Pancho left at the fort—with Uncle Jim's signature on it."

Martha Reardon laid the paper out on the table under the lamp, put on her spectacles and studied the bill of sale. The Sheriff gazed at it from over her shoulder. He was the first to speak.

"That's Jim's handwritin' all right," he said positively. "I'd recognize it anywheres."

But Bainter's eyes were fixed on his aunt. Color had come back to her cheeks, and when finally she looked up, her gray eyes were snapping. Hope shot through the tall Texan.

"The handwriting looks like Jim's," said Martha Reardon. "For a minute I was fooled. But it's not this—just a good imitation."

"Yuh shore?" demanded Bainter, breathing hard.

"Positive," she said vigorously.

"Ha!" Bainter exploded triumphantly. "I knew—"

Whatever he was going to say was suddenly cut short by the sound of horses' hoofs drumming furiously on the range. Many horses. Nearer and nearer rolled the pounding rush.

CHAPTER XII

Back in the Calaboose

DARTING to the window, Lieutenant Tobe Bainter looked out. Vague forms were looming up out of the night. And there was a threat in the rush of those hoofs. He felt at his holster, then remembered that the night robbers had taken his gun. He turned questioningly to the sheriff.

"Sounds like we're gettin' plenty of company," he said briefly.

Horses snorted, squealed, as they drew up in the ranch-yard. A voice sounded outside, then another in reply.

"He's inside, men!" That was Jane Taylor's voice.

"It's the Basin folks," barked Sheriff Walter. "And they're after yore blood, Tobe." He pulled his gun. "Both of yuh"—he nodded at Hardtack—"are my prisoners. Don't forget that, and don't try to get away."

Abruptly, a mob of wrathful, purposeful men stormed into the house. Rifle and guns were clutched angrily in hands. Explosive yells burst when they caught sight of Bainter.

"There he is! Let's get him! Bring out the rope." They were in a vengeful, irate

mood. Violence rode riot among them.

Bainter recognized Webber and Hawkes and other cowmen he knew. But faintly familiar, bearded strangers, slit-eyed, tough-looking, led the mob. Then he spotted Del Sabin among them.

"Just a minute, boys," said Sheriff Walters calmly.

They whirled at the sound of his voice, startled to find him here.

"Bainter and Johnson are my prisoners," the lawman said. "And nothin's goin' to happen to 'em."

Cries of disappointment, rage, boiled from the crowd.

"To thunder with the Sheriff!" yelled someone in the rear. "Get that doublecrossin', owl-hootin' cowboy and his pard!"

The angry mob swirled closer. Bainter retreated, picked up a chair.

"Stand back!" cried a woman's brittle voice suddenly.

Bainter's aunt had seized a heavy scatter rifle, and had it leveled at the mob leaders.

"I wouldn't like to shoot my own friends," she added dry. "But I can't be so particular this time. Especially when they come rushin' into my house without knockin' on the door."

Bainter smiled wryly. The play was out of his hand, but it was likewise being taken out of the mob's hands. Doubt, uncertainty was plainly visible on the faces of the men comprising it. They hadn't counted on this.

Shooting down a woman was not exactly in their line.

Burly, heavy-set, and red-eyed, Del Sabin pushed through to the edge of the mob.

"Give him up, Mrs. Reardon," he called hoarsely. "He ain't no good. Yuh heard what Evers told. Yore nephew ain't worth savin'."

Cries of approval rang out behind him.

"Hawkes—Webber," the sheriff spoke up, "I'm appointin' yuh my deputies. We got law and order in the Basin, and no mob is goin' to interfere with it. Bainter and Johnson are prisoners of the law. If there's charges brought against 'em, they'll be give a fair trial, right and proper. Now come on, you two, and be sworn in."

Slowly, reluctantly, the two men emerged from the mob, raised their right hands and received the oath of office.

"Reckon the Sheriff's right, men," said husky-voiced, bulky Fred Webber. "Even an onery owlhoot deserves a trial."

"Yeah," Hawkes seconded him. "Guess the hangin'll have to wait till after the trial. Mebbe yuh'd better mosey out of Aunt Martha's house. Reckon we was kind of hasty."

Bainter slowly lowered his chair. It was plain that the spirit of the mob had suddenly changed. Angry sputtering still rose from its midst, but the hard, rigid core of violence had been dissolved. The men remained, but they shifted uneasily, dubiously.

"Three men and an old lady ain't goin' to stop us!" suddenly shouted Del Sabin. "Are they, boys?"

But his appeal was ineffectual. The mob muttered, but the fury that had whipped and goaded them on, was gone.

"Hawkes — Webber," the Sheriff said quickly, coolly, "if these men in the mob move, shoot Sabin first."

Bainter grinned. Sabin pulled back fast into the mob. That started the movement toward the door. In a few moments the last man had drifted out. The five people in the room remained tense, until they heard the sound of horses moving off. Soon the echo of hoof beats faded away in the night. Then they relaxed.

"Reckon you two can go home now," the lawman said to Hawkes and Webber. "I'll be able to get my prisoners to the calaboose myself. Don't think there'll be any more trouble tonight."

THE two newly appointed deputies glanced coldly at Bainter and Johnson.

"All right, Jud," said Hawkes. "Good night, Aunt Martha. Sorry we busted in this way."

"Good night," said Martha Reardon coolly, and watched her two neighbors leave.

"Let's get movin', Tobe," said the sheriff.

Bainter nodded. He put his arm around his aunt's shoulders and kissed her on the cheeks.

"Yuh shore stopped 'em cold, Aunt Martha," he said grinning. "And don't worry—we'll pull out of this tight."

Jane Taylor entered the house, came toward Bainter. Her face was darkly flushed, her dark eyes troubled, uncertain. A strange emotion suddenly welled up in Bainter.

"I'm sorry, Tobe Bainter," she told him, her voice husky. "I was angry. I shouldn't have sent them in here."

She held out her hand. He took it, felt his throat as dry at the contact.

"That's all right, Jane," he said. Then he grinned again. "I'll forgive yuh—if yuh just call me 'Jim'."

She suddenly flashed a wide, gay smile at

him. And dimples appeared in her cheeks.

"I want to show yuh somethin'," he said suddenly.

He put a hand into his pocket and brought out a paper marked "Bill of Sale."

* * * * *

Sheriff Walter and his two prisoners drifted down Winton's main street. As they passed the adobe bank building, they noticed a faint, yellow light shining within.

"That's funny," muttered the lawman. "Reckon the Major's doin' some night work."

They entered the unadorned office of the calaboose. Wearily the three men slumped into chairs.

"Well, Sheriff," Bainter said, "what yuh aim to do with us?"

"Not much I can do, Tobe," replied the lawman, "except hold yuh 'til trial."

A wry smile twisted Bainter's lips. "I reckon Mr. Sabin was a kind of disappointed gent tonight."

Hardtack laughed. "He shore was a brave hombre—till he saw them three guns pointin' straight at his heart."

"Wonder how them townfellers knew we were at Aunt Martha's," mused Bainter.

"Mebbe somebody saw us ride through town," answered the orderly.

"Mebbe," Bainter said thoughtfully. Then bitterly he added: "And I figgered the money I borrered from Pancho would help the Basin folk out of a tight. Instead, they come yellin' bloody murder against me."

"Can't blame 'em much, Tobe," commented the Sheriff. "Yuh been gone for five years. Suddenly yuh turn up with talk of a new trail, and with nobody knowin' who the Comanchero is. And when they send their pool herd across, Evers comes stumblin' back with that dirty-soundin' story. They ain't forgot yuh used to be a right, high-flyin' button. No wonder they came after yuh."

"Yeah," muttered Bainter. "Mebbe they had a right to get riled. But what's goin' to happen to their spreads now?"

"Reckon Major Harris'll take 'em over," replied Sheriff Walters. "Unless the Claim Commissioner, Haines, pulls a rabbit out of a hat and gets some money for 'em. Saw him today. Seemed kind of hopeful about an answer he was expectin'."

"What's the Major's hurry anyhow?" demanded Bainter. "Now that we know who's supplyin' the Injuns, and we finally got the evidence on him."

Booted footsteps suddenly rustled outside the calaboose door. The door was thrown open and Major Web Harris himself entered. His eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"I thought you generally keep your prisoners locked up in cells, Sheriff?" he remarked suavely.

"They're safe, Major Harris," said the lawman, flushing.

"I voted for you in the last election, Walters," declared the distinguished-looking man with the graying temples. "But this certainly looks as though you're overstepping the bounds of your office. You know I have a little influence in this town."

"But not enough to get me stretched tonight—huh Major?" Bainter said.

The black-frocked Harris, Bainter admitted, rubbed him the wrong way. Or perhaps it was the memory of that afternoon when he had first seen Jane—in Harris' arms. Or perhaps he was just tired. Certainly there was nothing tangible on which to pin suspicion of the banker. Yet he felt the change in the Major. That he had a violent strain was suddenly plain in his eyes.

"What do you mean by that, Bainter?" flared Harris.

BAINTER smiled, feeling somehow that he reached inside this man.

"I'm shore yore man Sabin must have told yuh what happened," he said, "about three men and an old lady?"

He again felt he had scored. But the major recovered quickly.

"Certainly Sabin told me what happened. I quite agree with Sheriff Walters that law and order must be preserved, even though you deserve a speedy hanging." He smiled tauntingly. "That was a clever trick, telling us you had evidence that some Mexican was the Comanchero, while you were the man all the time."

"I still got the evidence against the Mexican, Harris," Bainter drawled. "More, Juan Pancho was usin' forged bills of sale."

"Forged?" exclaimed the Major, his brow knitting.

"Yeah," replied Bainter. "My Aunt Martha and Miss Taylor will testify to that."

"Of course you have the bills of sale in your possession?" asked Major Harris.

Bainter tapped his breast pocket. "You bet." He grinned.

The Major turned to the sheriff with asperity.

"Perhaps you ought to lock your prisoners behind bars?" He turned to leave.

"Say Harris," called Bainter, a sudden

thought striking him forcefully, "where does yore teller come from?"

Major Harris turned slowly. "He told me Chicago. Why?"

"Curious—that's all," said Bainter.

But when the banker had closed the jail door behind him, the lean-jawed Texan turned swiftly to Sheriff Walters.

"Sheriff," he said swiftly, "I just had an idea. Where are yore 'Wanted' posters?"

The lawman looked at him queerly. "Yuh don't think Harris—"

"No," said Bainter. "The teller. His face has suddenly become mighty familiar to me."

Sheriff Walters went to his roll-top desk and pulled out a large sheaf of age-yellow posters.

"Got more," he said, as he passed them over.

For ten minutes, Bainter examined posters, some so old they fell apart in his hands. The Sheriff kept bringing out new piles. Finally, disappointed, Bainter was about to give up when his eye settled on a wrinkled, torn folder.

"That's him," he cried. He read the name under the picture. "Joe Bird. The same pasty face and corn-colored mustache."

"Let's see," said the lawman, scanning the notice. "Humm—wanted for robbery and embezzlement in three states. Covered plenty of territory, didn't he?" He rose. "Yuh boys better take them two cells yuh had before. I'm goin' to mosey over to the bank. Major Harris ought to know the kind of hombre he's got workin' for him."

He stuffed the poster into his pocket.

Sheriff Walters crossed the dust-laden main street, angling toward the bank. Fifty feet from the building, he halted in his tracks. A muffled report, as of a gun fired indoors, sounded suddenly. The lawman broke into a run.

The bank door gave way to his touch. Gun palmed, he scooted down the corridor. Alight shone from Harris' office. Then he burst in—witness to a strange scene.

Major Harris was standing in the centre of the room, a still smoking pistol in hand. A grotesquely sprawled figure lay at his feet, dead. Blood was oozing out of a hole in the dead man's forehead.

Then Sheriff Walters realized that he was gazing at the face of the man whose picture was in his pocket—Joe Bird, thief, embezzler. A gun was clutched in the teller's hand. And the entire office was strewn with papers.

"What happened, Major?" demanded the lawman.

"Sheriff!" cried the banker, instant relief in his face. "I'm glad you came."

He threw himself heavily into the desk chair and mopped his brow with a silk kerchief. He glanced at the dead man.

"And to think that I was taken in by him," he muttered.

"So yuh found out, too?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes," replied the Major. "After I left the jail, I noticed a light burning here. I was certain I had blown it out before leaving for the night. I must have entered quietly, because he didn't hear me. He had already gone through my desk, scattering papers around, and was in the corner, watching some papers burn." He pointed to some charred ashes. "There."

"Yeah?"

"I came around the desk," continued the Major, "and then I realized what he was up to. There had been some shortages lately and my accountants were going to examine the books. Bird had burned some of the records. I accused him of it and, seeing I wasn't wearing a gun, he admitted it. But I wear a derringer in my sleeve."

He shrugged expressively.

CHAPTER XIII

Midnight Visitors

FROM behind the bars of his cell, Bainter looked up as the Sheriff entered.

"Well?" he asked quietly.

"The Major caught up with Bird," answered the lawman briefly.

"How'd it happen?" demanded Bainter.

In a few words, Sheriff Walters recounted what he had seen and what the banker had told him.

"Did yuh see what was in the fire?" asked Bainter.

"Yeah," said the lawman. "Ashes."

"Kind of come handy, didn't it?" commented Bainter, after a moment.

"What yuh mean?" demanded the lawman, unbuckling his gun-belt and hanging it on a wall hook.

"Don't it strike yuh as kind of queer,"

Bainter said thoughtfully, "that just when we find out who the teller is, so does the Major, and plugs him?"

"What'd yuh expect him to do?" cried Sheriff Walters, with slight asperity. "Give him a raise in pay?"

"No," replied Bainter, smiling a little. "Just turn him over to the law. Remember the Major said he's for law and order, too."

"It's hard to be for law and order," said the Sheriff, "when the other feller has a gun in his hand."

Bainter laughed. "Don't let the Major hear yuh say that," he said. "And don't forget he's got influence at the pollin' places."

The sheriff snorted. "Go to sleep."

Grinning, Bainter stretched himself out on the calaboose bunk. In the next cell, Hardtack was already pounding his ear, and snores came from him in steady volume.

The sheriff had turned the lantern down and it was dark, save for the reflected glimmer of the town lights, and the whitish glow of the scimitar moon. A vague, nebulous light was in the cell.

But the gray-eyed Texan found sleep evasive. A hundred questions pounded like mad at his brain, tossed him about restlessly. Ever since he had learned of Chris Evers' story, they had plagued him.

Who had framed him? Who wanted him out of the way? Why? What was the game? Was it personal enmity or was he just a pawn in some unknown, mysterious plot? Question piled on question until he was dizzy.

But there was one fact to which he could hold. Failure to take the pool herd to the fort meant the loss of the cowmen's spreads. That led logically to another question. Who did this benefit? Obviously, Major Web Harris, who had boasted he would own the Basin soon.

Could the Major be involved in a deliberate attempt to ruin the cowmen, so that he could come into possession of their land and cattle?

Bainter rose to his feet, took out the makings, fixed a quirly, lighted up and paced the cell. Since he had met the Major and taken the man's measure, he felt that the man was capable of sly and underhand dealings. Yet the answer was too easy. It fitted too well.

Certainly Harris had the motive—to get the spreads fast and cheap. And certainly he had it in for Tobe Bainter. Hadn't the Lieutenant humiliated the Major before Jane that day?

From his dealings with men, Bainter knew Harris was not the forgiving nor forgetting type. And what would suit the Major better than to kill two birds with one stone? Revenge on Bainter for the humiliation, and assurance that the herd would not cross.

Bainter threw his cigarette down and stamped it out. Again the explanation was far too simple. He shook his head. The Major was a wealthy man and didn't need to resort to stealing and killing to gain his ends.

Other questions hammered at Bainter. The robbery, the shooting of the teller, the sudden appearance of the mob at his aunt's house, the burning of the general store. Did they have any connection with each other, with the frame-up? Were they all part of one big scheme?

Finally, exhausted by the futile and ceaseless whirl of his mind, Bainter threw himself down on the bunk and fell into a dream-tossed sleep. . . .

HE AWOKE suddenly, every sense alert. A grim feeling of danger clutched him. Town noises had ceased, but others had taken their place. Furtive, uncanny sounds, eerie murmurs, crept stealthily through the night. Vague echoes lurked in the shadows beyond the jail, swelled the darkness with a tense, muted strain. Deadened whispers stifled a whimpering gloom. The Four Horsemen were in the saddle tonight.

With a sudden devastating roar, the darkness was burst wide open in a trumpeting blast of gunfire. Bedlam focused on the jail where yelling, shooting men unavenged. Clattering six-shooters tore jagged gaps in the night silence.

"Hardtack!" yelled Bainter, above the uproar. "It's you and me they're after. And we're caught here like rats in a trap!"

As Hardtack rushed out into the corridor to join him, Bainter saw the jail door suddenly burst open and men pour in. Shouts, cries filled the jail.

"Where are they? . . . Drag 'em out! . . . String 'em up!"

"There's one chance we got," Bainter whispered sibilantly. "That's to get through 'em before they get a light on. Come on!"

With the wiry orderly following, Bainter hurtled forward toward the door like a battering-ram. He bowled over men like ten-pins in his desperate, surging charge. They howled with pain as they were dashed

aside and sent slamming to the floor.

Bainter had almost made the door when he stumbled. A cry went up in the darkness and toughened, calloused hands pinned his limbs. He squirmed out of their grasp and struck hard at the nearest assailant. The man gasped and staggered back.

They rushed him. Like pistons his fists lashed out, driving, hammering, slashing. A savage fury possessed him and he flung himself at his opponents like a wounded tiger.

An arm reached out and encircled his neck. In a flash he brought his elbow back, biting hard into the man's stomach. Grunting, the fellow let go. Bainter whirled, drove an iron fist into his attacker's jaw. The man went down like a pole-axed steer.

They swarmed over him, giving him no breathing spell. He fought back grimly, but their weight forced him against the wall, and he went down beneath them. There was a savage and fierce mêlée for a minute, with a lean-jawed Texas fury punching, twisting out of grasping, muscular hands that sought to hold him down.

Then suddenly and miraculously, he was free again. He struggled to his feet, panting, dazed, but still fighting back.

Abruptly, the fight came to an end. The lantern flashed on lighting the jail office, and his opponents fell back. But their fists bristled with six-shooters.

"Get 'em up, cowboy!" rasped a commanding voice.

For the first time, Bainter was able to see the raiders. They were all masked to the eyes. As he raised his arms slowly, he noticed that Hardtack was still on his feet, but that the Sheriff was sprawled on the floor. Even now, however, the lawman was coming to and sitting up dazedly. Evidently he had been struck on the head.

"Come on!" impatiently called the man giving orders. "We ain't got all night. How about cooperatin', Sheriff?"

The masked men laughed harshly as they laid rough hands on the lawman, hauled him into a chair and bound and gagged him.

"What's the big idea, gents?" demanded Bainter, trying to stall for time. He knew he was in a desperate tight. His lips were suddenly dry.

"We're goin' to give you and yore pard a little party down at the cottonwoods," growled the leader. "We missed out before because yore friend the Sheriff here decided to hold out for a jury trial."

"So yuh got tired of waitin'," drawled Bainter, "and figgered yuh'd drop in and hold the trial here an' now?"

"Stall—stall!" his mind screamed. Every second was a year ticking off his life.

"Heck!" cried the leader. "We don't need no trial to know yuh're guilty as all get-out. We know right now what the jury'd decide. Don't we boys?"

Raucous laughter greeted the question.

"Who decided—you or the Major?" snapped Bainter.

Anything—anything to stall. For an instant, silence struck the room.

"All right," roared the leader angrily. "We've wasted enough time already. Let's go!"

Bainter's hands were hauled down and tied behind his back, wrists thonged tight with rawhide. The same was done to Hardtack. Then the lantern was dimmed and the calaboose door shut behind the helpless lawman.

OUTSIDE, horsemen were waiting for them. The two prisoners were forced up into empty saddles, and then the masked cavalcade headed down the darkened, gloomy, deserted main street.

The night had become cloudy, and the moon shifted uneasily among dark masses. When it slipped clear it shed a dim, obscure light. When it vanished, somber shadows blanketed the ground. Momentarily, it hung ghostlike in the sky.

Frantic ideas for escape milled through Bainter's brain endlessly. Sweat broke out over him in cold waves. Muscles tensed futilely. If he tried to make a break for it, with his arms tied behind, they would get him before he was twenty feet away.

A glimmer of hope flashed through him, as he suddenly felt the cold steel of a half-hidden rifle in the saddle-boot. Out of carelessness or confidence, they had left it there. If only he could get his hands loose. Lips compressed he strained guardedly at the bonds. He panted and gasped softly with pain as the rawhide cut deeply into his flesh. Hot tears of anger, frustration flooded his eyes. Hope faded.

They had reached the outskirts of the town when the leader called back:

"Search them cowboys! Ain't no use leavin' valuables on dead men."

The masked rider alongside Bainter went through his pockets, emptying them. Then the rider spurred ahead, taking the contents with him to the leader, up front. Bainter cursed vehemently. They had taken the two

bills of sale, proof against the Mexican. How would he ever be able to prove to the Colonel that Pancho was the Comanchero?

Bainter laughed mirthlessly. What difference did it make now?

The moon vanished. Suddenly Bainter stiffened in the saddle. The sharp point of a steel blade rasped at his spine. Then he realized that his bonds were being sawed loose. Abruptly they parted, and his hands were free.

"I pay my debt to the *Americano,*" a muffled accented voice whispered in his ear.

Bainter instantly recognized the voice of José Hernando, the Mexican nephew of Major Harris, and fiancé of the singer at the saloon. Quickly he glanced behind, but all he could make out was a confused blur of moving shadows.

Cautiously, Bainter slid the rifle from saddle-boot. Just then the rider who had searched him came back. With a sharp intake of breath, Bainter swiftly brought up the lethal weapon gripped tight in his fists, and crashed the stock down hard on the masked man's head. It landed with a ploppy crunch. Without a cry, the raider toppled from his horse.

A yell broke. With headlong speed, Bainter wheeled and spurred his horse. A shouting raider strove to cut him off. Whirling the rifle like a tomahawk, Bainter drove it furiously at the shadowy figure.

The man's scream died in his throat as the rifle slashed down on his jaw. He slumped suddenly on his horse and tumbled to the earth.

Again Bainter touched his horse with spurs. The animal spurted away, racing back into town with accelerated speed. A taunting smile curved Bainter's lips as he heard shouts and cries whip the night. Horses in pursuit thudded after him. He hugged his mount's neck, crouching low as bullets began to sing.

Nearing the jail, Bainter brought up short, slid fast out of saddle, and slapped the horse hard on its flank. The riderless animal thundered off down the main street.

Darting toward the adobe calaboose, Bainter burrowed into the deep shadows of its side wall, just as his pursuers clattered past. He smiled grimly as he heard them cursing. But he had no time to lose, if he was going back for Hardtack.

Hipping around to the front, Bainter slipped into the jail. Shutting the door quickly, he cupped a match in his hand. The Sheriff sat squirming in the chair, striving vainly to wriggle out of his bonds. Bainter cut him loose and stripped the gag from his mouth. The lawman arose, fuming.

"Get yore guns, Sheriff!" Bainter ordered urgently.

They left the jail with all speed and ran down the side of the street, hugging the line of buildings. In a few moments they had reached the edge of the town. Behind them they heard horses running. In a moment, masked riders rushed past.

"Reckon they caught the hoss," muttered Bainter. "They'll be lookin' for me."

THEY passed the town's last building and cut across into the protection of a mesquite tangle. Bainter pulled up sharp as he caught the gleam of a flaming torch in the distance.

"They're gettin' ready to string up Hardtack!" he blurted. "Sheriff, we got to stop 'em!"

"There's too blame many of 'em!" cried the lawman. "Mebbe we can blast some of them sidewinders with yore rifle and my guns, but one of 'em will put a bullet through your pard."

"Yeah," muttered Bainter.

A desperate idea suddenly seized him as he heard a horse coming up behind them. Quickly he told it to the Sheriff. The lawman grunted, shook his head dubiously. But already Bainter had gone into action.

"Do as I say!" he flung over his shoulder as he ran for the tree ahead whose branches overhung the trail.

Leaving his rifle at the base of the tree, Bainter scrambled up the gnarled trunk and out onto the branch, just as a masked rider came flashing by. Then the Texan jumped.

There was a startled cry, suddenly choked off, as the rider was abruptly swept from his mount and dragged to the ground. The horse snorted with fear and started to bolt, but a man darted out from the brush and seized the bridle. Quickly the horse was led into the shadows.

With the advantage of surprise on his side, Bainter had little difficulty with the masked man. The man thudded to the earth, striking his head against a rock in the trail. Notwithstanding, he lashed out at his attacker and tried to crawl to his feet. Bainter let him rise half-way, then plunged his fist with terrific force into the renegade's face. There was a dull, spongy sound, and the masked man sank back without a groan.

Kneeling over him, Bainter whipped the

mask off the raiders' face and tied it over his own. Jumping back to the tree trunk, he seized the rifle and flung astride the horse that Sheriff Walters held ready.

CHAPTER XIV

Interrupted Necktie Party

RIDING around a bend, Bainter came headlong on the spot where men were making preparations for a gruesome end for his orderly and friend, Hardtack Johnson. Abruptly he checked his speed.

Flares were planted in the ground, lighting up the scene. A large group of horsemen were milling around the tree. Directly underneath a stout, low branch sat the orderly. His hands were still tied behind his back, but in addition, a coil had been looped tight around his neck. The other end had been thrown up and fastened over the branch. Hardtack's face was pale but defiant-looking.

As Bainter came up, the leader yelled at him:

"Did yuh get him?"

Disguising his voice into a harsh growl, Bainter replied:

"No, cuss his hide!"

The leader hurled imprecations at the escaped cowboy.

"The boss is goin' to be mad as the devil," he finally cried, savagely.

"What about him?" A masked figure thumbed at Hardtack.

"We're goin' to let him cool his heels," snapped the leader. "It'll learn him not to associate with badmen."

Hoarse laughter swept the group. As they stopped laughing another sound—a dry, brittle chuckle—snapped them around. Dumbfounded, they stared into the black muzzle of a rifle, leveled at them in the hands of the masked rider who had just ridden up.

"What's the idea, Sam?" growled the leader. "This ain't no time for jokes."

"Yuh're right," he drawled, making no attempt to disguise his voice this time. "Only this ain't no joke."

A quiver ran through the surprised, shocked masked men.

"It's the cowboy!" shouted one of them.

"Tobe!" yelled Hardtack, in relief.

"Yeah, it's the cowboy," Bainter said evenly.

He tore off the black kerchief. Then, bringing up his rifle in a swift motion, he fired. There was a deafening blast of sound. And as the echo rolled off into the distant hills, the rope, linking Hardtack's neck to the branch above, parted and coiled down over the orderly's shoulders.

"Freeze, gents!" snapped Bainter.

As Hardtack, still wrist-tied, kneed his mount toward Bainter, the masked men's hands started to travel upward.

"You!" called Bainter, pointing the rifle at a nearby horseman. "Toss yore knife to me—handle my way."

The horseman, gazing at the leveled weapon, slowly plucked the bowie knife from his belt and tossed it carefully. Bainter caught it in his left hand.

His glance flicked out across the leaping spread of light cast by the wavering torches. Above black masks, the eyes of these men burned at him fiercely, fixedly.

Tension was here. Its pressure was piling up. The small of Bainter's back ached queerly. They were watching him quietly, patiently, waiting for him to make a mistake. Waiting.

A mounting breathlessness seemed to vibrate the packed dirt trail. Then a thin smile that hinted of stubbornness creased Bainter's lips.

"Draw up, Hardtack," he said sharply.

As he sawed into the rawhide with his left hand he caught a swift, sudden motion out of the corner of his eye. He fired quickly.

"Keep 'em up!" he yelled.

One masked rider gasped out in pain. He was a black-garbed gunny who had lunged for his gun because he had been partially hidden by the horseman alongside him. It was half clear of leather when he cried out and dropped the weapon, clutching his gun hand with the other, trying to stem the flow of blood. Bainter's bullet had torn deeply into the flesh of his hand. Other hands also had started traveling downward. but now they stayed up.

Bainter sighed with relief as the bowie knife abruptly cut through the last thong.

"All right, Tobe," said Hardtack, bringing his hands around, and rubbing his wrists.

"Now we'll have a look at the faces behind them masks," Bainter said.

"Better not," warned the leader. "Don't push us too far, hombre."

A cold breath swept along the trail. Colder

than the night winds rolling down from the crouching Elbow Range. The gruff-voiced leader was a menacing shape in the shadows, and his words an unmistakable threat. Tension mounted.

"Mebbe we better get out of here, Tobe?" whispered Hardtack.

"We'll take the sting out of them gents," Bainter muttered grimly. "Hardtack, throw their guns into the brush. Save a couple for us."

HASTILY the orderly threaded his way among the masked men, pulled their weapons and flung them out beyond the circle of light. He was obviously relieved when he rode back alongside Bainter.

"All right gents!" ordered Bainter. "Now slide off them hosses." His rifle swung in a menacing arc.

Grumbling, cursing, the masked men slowly lifted their legs over cantles and dropped to the ground.

"Drive 'em off, Hardtack," said Bainter, a faint grin beginning to web the corners of his eyes. "Yeah—the hosses. These gents are goin' to walk home. Serve 'em right for bustin' up our sleep, huh?"

Hardtack grinned also. He was enjoying himself.

"I was feelin' kind of oncomf'table for a minute," he confessed. "But now I feel better."

Rounding up the dozen-odd horses, he drove them out of sight. There was the sound of a gun report. In a few moments he came riding up. Beyond the crackling of the torch flares, the thud of horses hoofs could be heard moving away.

"You!" Bainter's rifle pointed straight at the leader. "Take your mask off!"

"Come and take it off," taunted the leader.

Bainter sat motionless. "All right," he said. "Yuh asked for it."

"Tobe!" Hardtack lifted a warning finger.

The *clip-clop* of horses hoofs still echoed the night air. But instead of moving away, in the direction in which Hardtack had scattered the raiders' mounts, these were coming closer—and from town.

The masked men also had heard the sounds. Bainter sensed excitement among them.

"It's the rest of 'em—still lookin' for me," muttered Bainter, disappointed. "Come on, Hardtack. We'll drift."

Swiftly they moved from light to darkness. Shadows swallowed them. In a few minutes, however, they drew up under a cottonwood and listened for sounds of pursuit, which oddly enough failed to develop. They spoke briefly, then parted company. Hardtack returned in the direction of the necktie party. Bainter cut across the Basin.

As Bainter swung along under the waning moon, in a sky which had abruptly been cleared of clouds, it suddenly occurred to him that the Sheriff hadn't shown up at the hang-tree.

"Heck!" he muttered. "Wonder what happened to him?"

For a moment he thought of turning back toward town, then decided against it. He would call by at the jail later. In the meantime, he had another visit to pay.

"Couple of things I want to ask that hombre," he muttered thoughtfully, his mind on the man he sought.

In the calaboose earlier that night, he had come to the conclusion that his line of reasoning regarding Major Web Harris had been too easy to arrive at; hence wrong. While nothing had happened since to cause him to revise his conclusion, yet the cottonwood party had given him plenty of food for thought.

There had been a phony air about that "party". The first time he had run into men who had wanted to make cottonwood fruit of him had been at the Rocking R. In that crowd had been not only men from town, but Basin folks whom he knew, and who had gathered in honest anger. But the second time a mob had come for him, at the jail, they had come masked.

Why masked? Why hadn't they come openly, as they had the first time?

"Because there wasn't any Basin cowmen with them this time—that's why," he muttered.

He had listened intently to their voices. Not one had he recognized. And as he and Sheriff Walters had run along the main street toward the edge of the town, the lawman had said no Basin cowmen were in the mob.

"If they wasn't Basin folks, who was they?" Bainter mused. "Looks like the same party that framed me is now tryin' to wipe me out pronto. Why? Because, alive, I make him uncomfortable. Because he don't want me to be brought to trial on account of mebbe he made a slip somewheres and he's afraid I'll tumble to it. Or mebbe he figgers I've already tumbled. So he sends his killers after me."

Unobserved, the harbingers of dawn had crept into the eastern sky. Faint streaks

of saffron hue were crawling slowly over the Elbow Range, lighting up the frosty peaks. The lead gray of the center sky was shifting to the west before the onslaught of lengthening pale streamers.

"Reckon I'll catch me some shut-eye for an hour," muttered Bainter.

Pulling up near a tangle of brush, he dismounted, slip-hitched his horse and threw himself under an overhanging bush. . . .

BAINTER'S sense of the passage of time woke him. He arose feeling refreshed. The sun had climbed over the crook of the Elbow Range, and the mountain peaks were fantastic spires of glittering minarets. For miles around they made a shining target.

"Still got a call to make," he muttered.

In a little while he drifted into sight of what had once been Ed Taylor's Box T outfit. The Major, the sheriff had informed him, had established his headquarters here.

Only half-hearted attempts had been made, Bainter observed as he pulled into a deserted yard, to keep the buildings in repair. The bunkhouse badly needed painting or whitewashing. One of the barn doors was hanging off its hinge, and sections of the corral fence were down.

"Mebbe the Major aims to stay only temporary," the Lieutenant mused.

Finding the door open, Bainter stepped softly into the house. He walked into the living room—and was confronted by Major Harris.

Harris had made a kind of office out of this room, by bringing from town a flat-top desk and some wooden file cabinets. Right now the new owner of the Box T was seated behind his desk, looking at some papers.

"Surprised to see me, Major?" Bainter's voice was casual.

A diffused flush came to Harris' freshly-shaven face, and Bainter caught a look of surprise in his eyes—eyes that were set a trifle too closely together. A smile came to the Major's lips, but it was a cold, ugly smile that accented his thin, cruel upper lip. Yet when he spoke his voice was suave as ever.

"I see you've broken out of jail, Bainter," was what he said.

Bainter arched his eyebrows in faint astonishment.

"Why, I came here to thank yuh for that," he said, leaning idly against the door jamb.

"What do you mean?" The Major's smile was gone suddenly.

Bainter frowned, as if something troubled him.

"Why I figgered them were yore boys, Major, that took me out of jail. Sounded like 'em to me—cussin' an' swearin'." His lips smiled.

"I don't know what you're talking about," snapped the distinguished-looking banker.

But Bainter caught a sudden uneasiness in the man, and wondered if he hadn't hit on something. He switched his attack. This always confused a man under fire. If the questions seemed aimless, followed no definite pattern, it threw the one interrogated offguard. Switch, and then hit back with the old line.

"Don't worry," he said. "But what gets me, Major, is how yuh ever stumbled across the Canyon in the Sands?"

Again Bainter felt a change in the man. It wasn't evident in the grim, outraged look on the Major's face. But it was there.

"Bainter," said the banker, rising, "I don't know why I've stood all this from you—your insinuations and dirty lies. Maybe because I sympathize with your aunt for having a crooked nephew. But you're an escaped prisoner, and I have a right to shoot you on sight. And I'll do it if you don't clear out of here!"

Stung, and losing his head momentarily, Bainter retorted:

"Shore! But don't forget, the whole Basin ain't yore property yet. And I'll let yuh in a little secret, Major. My name ain't Jim, and never was."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, Bainter regretted them. He had let his temper speak. Another sudden change had come over the Major. He beamed.

"Bainter," he said, "I'm greatly obliged to you for that information. So your name isn't Jim?"

"It won't make no difference Major," Bainter said through gritted teeth, "on account of what Sam, that leader of the hang-mob told me."

"Sam!" The Major's jovial appearance fled. "And what did Sam tell you?" he asked softly.

"That yuh're leavin' the Basin soon, Major."

An abrupt gleam in the banker's eyes made him wheel about. Del Sabin had just entered, and was staring at him in astonishment.

"Get him, Del!" snapped the Major savagely.

With an abrupt flip of his hand, a black

derringer appeared in it. He snapped a shot at Bainter.

But Bainter was already moving. Leaping agilely, he cleared the desk and seized at the Major's hand. The stout banker backed and fired again. The bullet plowed into Bainter's forearm. He gasped in pain but lurched forward.

This time he caught the Major's hand, lunged down and swung up behind him. Harris was now between Sabin and himself, and served as a shield against Sabin's gun, which was crammed in the killer's fist.

Drawing his own weapon now, Bainter aimed it at Sabin. The stout banker had been struggling in Bainter's iron grasp, but he ceased.

"Tell yore friend to put his gun away," Bainter said, "and that yuh're seein' me to my hoss."

CHAPTER XV

Hardtack Pokes Around

JOHNSON, Lieutenant Bainter's orderly, had been a prisoner twice that night already — once in the calaboose, and the second time at a cottonwood party given in his honor. But Hardtack could not guess, as he parted company with Bainter under the cottonwood, that he was destined to become a prisoner for the third time that same night.

Not that Hardtack Johnson was not cautious. He had gone through the War between the States and suffered only minor injuries, and he knew how to take care of himself. But unfortunately, he was not clairvoyant, and could not foresee the future.

Hardtack Johnson proceeded slowly as he headed his mount back toward the hang-tree. In the distance he made out the sky glow caused by the flares around the tree.

He reined in abruptly behind brush as the sudden pound of running hoofs came his way. Three riderless horses raced by him, followed closely by a shouting horseman.

A smile cracked the leathery surface of Hardtack's face. They were still rounding up the horses he had loosed on the prairie. Then the three horses came back with the rider hazing them, and Hardtack slipped out and followed at a safe distance.

As he approached the flare-lit tree, he dismounted, and snaked forward on foot. He loosened his gun in holster when only a leafy spread separated him from the lighted circle. Carefully he parted the branches and looked out.

Masked riders still moved around the tree. Some, however, were still afoot, and obviously waiting for their horses to be rounded up.

Then the orderly gasped. In the center of the milling group sat a prisoner, his hands lashed behind and his eyes bandaged. Then Hardtack recognized him—Sheriff Walters!

Bainter had told him he had released the Sheriff and that the lawman had come along. This then must have been the explanation of the failure of the killers to pursue Bainter and himself. They had found Walters, and evidently the lawman had put up a battle.

The harsh voice of the leader rasped through the clearing.

"We ain't waitin' for you boys any more," he said testily, to the masked men on foot. "We're headin' back to the shack, with our *amigo* here. You foller us out there when yore hosses are brung in."

The leader turned his mount and slipped out of the circle of light. With their captive in their midst, the rest swung after him. Among them, Hardtack noticed, was the wounded gunman, a bloodied kerchief swabbed around his hand.

For an instant, the orderly deliberated. Should he follow this group or wait for the second? Coming to a swift decision, Hardtack abruptly left the leafy bush, went silently back for his horse, mounted, and set out after the gunmen.

The sky which had cleared became overcast and dark again. Yet Hardtack Johnson considered this an advantage. If he couldn't see the men ahead at least he couldn't be seen by them. The soft *clip-clop* of the horses in front of him as they pushed across the Basin, angling off toward the foothills, was sufficient trail for Hardtack.

For more than an hour, the grizzled orderly cautiously followed his former captors over high-grassed rangeland. Imperceptibly the ground rose. Now thorny patches, mesquite tangle and scrub pines dotted the bottoms. Then a towering shadow, blacker, deeper than the rest, loomed up out of the night.

"Elbow hills," muttered Hardtack.

Without warning the horse sounds in front

of him abruptly ceased. He halted, listened intently, keening the wind. In the distance, the murmur of a mountain brook tumbling over rocks in its rapid descent, came to him. Stray night sounds—the hoot of an owl, the faint, nerve-searing scream of a panther in the hills—drifted his way.

Apprehensively, Hardtack wondered if the men hadn't suddenly suspected they were being followed and were setting a trap for him? All at once, a light flared in a web of trees ahead.

The orderly sighed softly, relieved. It was lamplight in a building of some sort. This was evidently the shack to which the leader had referred.

Leaving his mount at a cottonwood, Hardtack advanced warily through brush and clump. A clearing opened among the trees. In its centers, was a cabin. From the right, came the whinny of horses in a corral.

THROUGH the lighted windows, Hardtack could see men moving about. He crept forward, inch by inch, until he squatted under a partially open shutter, made of heavy pine slabs. The windows were paneless but wire-screened. But the wooden shutters could be closed against rain, or enemy bullets.

"What are we goin' to do with this nosy lawman?" a coarse voice was demanding as Hardtack listened. "Mebbe we ought to get rid of him now, huh?"

"No," growled the leader. "We'll wait till tomorrer, an' find out what the boss says."

"He's goin' to say plenty," grunted another voice, "when he finds out both of them cowboys slipped out of our hands."

"Mebbe if Del—" began another.

"No names!" screamed the leader furiously.

"So Del Sabin is a member of yore gang?" said a voice Hardtack recognized as belonging to Sheriff Walters.

"Never heard of the hombre," said the leader gruffly.

"Heard the boss say," declared the first man to speak, "that it was time the Basin had another sheriff, anyway. This one, he said, was hookin' up with all the lawless elements in these parts."

The shack rocked with harsh laughter.

"This is one hombre," cried a rasping voice, "who ain't goin' to get away from us!"

Crouched on his hands and knees beneath the window ledge, Hardtack pushed up slightly, to obtain a view of the room inside, and to get a look at the faces of the men.

His eyes had just cleared the ledge, when a twig cracked behind him. Instinctively he whirled, whipping up his gun. A dim figure swept down upon him out of the darkness, fastening horny, calloused fingers around his throat. The butt of a gun descended on his head, knocking his hat off and dazing him.

The shock jarred the gun from his hand, but he levered himself erect, trying to dislodge his attacker, who by now had climbed his back. The man clung grimly, tightening his throat grip.

Desperately Hardtack lunged backward, slamming his assailant hard to earth. His unseen opponent yelled, and suddenly other figures detached themselves from the shadows and hurtled upon the hapless orderly, beating, hacking, hammering at him.

Once more a gun butt was crashed down on Hardtack's head. Dimly he was aware of the cabin door being flung open in a shaft of yellow light, and of yelling men, with guns drawn, dashing out. Then everything went black. . . .

But he was only out for a minute or two. He knew that as he came to, he felt rough hands going over him, searching for weapons. His hands were being tied and a bandanna quickly placed around his eyes. He was hauled to his feet and half-dragged, half-pushed in through the cabin door.

He was thrust down into a straight-backed wooden chair and told, with hard oaths, to stay there. He realized then that the gunnies he left at the tree had crept up on him and taken him by surprise. Silently he cursed himself for not having been more careful.

"Heck!" cried a surprised voice. "It's the cowboy we was gettin' ready to stretch."

"Yeah!" roared the leader. "Get outside, men. Mebbe his pard was with him. Look everywhere!"

Hardtack heard the sound of the door slamming and of scuffling feet as men left the cabin on the run. Jingling spurs paced the floor, then stopped in front of him.

"So yuh came snoopin' back, huh?" rasped the leader's voice. Despite the anger, a note of worry crept through. "What'd yuh expect to find out?"

"Why yuh gents was treatin' me so imperlite at the tree," said Hardtack.

"Yuh're a right smart hombre, ain't yuh!" sneered the leader. "Mebbe that's why you and yore pard figgered yuh could get away

with that doublecrossin' trick yuh played on the Basin cowmen."

"Reckon that's why you're holdin' the Sheriff, huh?" Hardtack snorted.

"Him?" cried the leader. "Heck, we aim to let him go. Just as soon as we round up yore pard."

"Yuh mean with a bullet in his back," retorted Hardtack recklessly.

The flat of the hand that suddenly landed flush on Hardtack's face resounded sharply through the room. The blow almost knocked him off the chair. Behind the bandanna, his eyes blazed. Anger flared in him, but he was helpless.

"Mebbe that'll learn yuh not to be so smart," snarled the leader.

"So yuh're doin' all this for the ranchers in the Basin, huh?" the Sheriff cut in.

JANGLING spurs indicated that the leader was pacing the floor again. There was no doubt he was worried, and he seemed anxious to justify himself to the lawman, for some obscure reason.

"Yeah, that's right," he said. "We was hired by cowmen who were kind of impatient with a long drawn-out trial. That's why we'll have to hold yuh, Sheriff, till we're done. Can't have yuh interferin'."

"That ain't a bad story yuh're tellin', hombre," remarked the sheriff. "Except for one thing."

"What's that?" demanded the leader, sharp-voiced.

"It ain't true," replied the lawman. "I been listenin' to yore voices right along. There ain't a one I recognized. And I've been in the Basin fifteen years."

The stamp of booted feet sounded outside the cabin. In a moment the door was flung open and men tramped in.

"Well?" rasped the leader.

"This cowboy must have come alone," replied a sour voice. "We surrounded the place. Couldn't find nobody. Just one hoss. Must have been his."

The spurs came to a halt before Hardtack again.

"Now talk straight, hombre," growled the leader. "You bein' dead or alive don't make no difference to me. Was yore pard with yuh?"

"No," replied Hardtack instantly, truthfully. "I came alone."

"Where is he now?" demanded the leader.

"Don't rightly know," answered the orderly. "Just told me he had to pay someone a visit, and rode off."

"Yuh're lyin'!" snapped the leader.

"No, I ain't," cried Hardtack. "I'm tellin' yuh the truth. I ain't got any more idea than you where Tobe is."

"I think he's tellin' the truth," said the sour-voiced gunny.

"Yeah," muttered the leader. "Reckon he is." Then he hurled another question at his captive. "Did he know yuh came after us?"

For a split second, Hardtack deliberated. "No," he said mildly. "Tobe told me to head back for the calaboose, said it'd be safe there the rest of the night. He didn't figger the Sheriff was with you fellers."

"Why didn't yuh go where he told yuh?" demanded the leader.

"I started that way," replied Hardtack, "then I heard yore hosses movin' across the Basin—"

"So yuh follered," growled the sour voice.

Hardtack shrugged. "Reckon mebbe I was too plumb curious for my health."

"Let's plant some lead in his vittles and get rid of him right now," suggested the sour voice.

Hardtack Johnson felt the hackles rise on his neck as silence spread through the room. Desperation filled him. He never minded the thought of dying in the heat of battle, or being shot from his horse. But dying like a rat in a trap was something else.

"I know I ain't got much to say hereabouts, hombres," he put in mildly. "But it seems to me that gettin' rid of me won't do yuh much good."

"Why not?" asked the leader, an edge of curiosity in his voice.

"Because Tobe Bainter's around," said Hardtack.

For a moment, the orderly felt the leader's eyes stabbing into him, then the man laughed.

"Yuh just gave me an idea, hombre,"

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he said. "Mebbe we can use yuh as bait to catch the big fish, huh?"

Hardtack slept fitfully the balance of the night, his mind busy with endless schemes for getting a message to Bainter—all futile. In the morning his bonds were removed from eyes and wrists and he was given some hot coffee. The same for the Sheriff.

Hardtack found that they were in a one-roomed shack that looked like a line camp. Three men, tall, surly-looking, remained in the shack. Despite their being masked, the stamp of outlaw was on them. Two stood by, their hands on gun-butts. The third brought the coffee. Outside, in the morning sun, Hardtack caught a glimpse of the rest of the band saddling up, then mounting and riding away. If only he could send some message to town, to Bainter!

A sudden inspiration seized Hardtack as he noticed the hand of the outlaw bringing the coffee. It was swathed in a bloody bandage.

Evidently this was the man Bainter had shot the night before.

"Say, hombre," Hardtack muttered quietly, "it ain't nothin' to me—but yuh're goin' to be in a bad way soon."

"What yuh mean?" growled the outlaw. He spoke with a slight lisp, as if one or several teeth had been knocked out.

"Look at that hand of yores," said Hardtack. "I been in the Army. I know."

"What do yuh know?" demanded his captor. "Spit it out!" There was a note of apprehension in his voice.

"Look at the red streaks runnin' up from your wrist," said the orderly, pointing. "That means gangrene—if yuh don't get to a doctor in a hurry."

"Gangrene?" yelled the outlaw.

"Shore," said Hardtack. "If it ain't caught in time." He shrugged. Casually he glanced at the man's eyes, showing above the bandanna mask. They were black with fear.

Hardtack saw no more of the effects of his little stratagem. But he heard them. Soon after, his own and the Sheriff's eyes were bandaged and their wrists tied again. Then heard a hurried consultation and the voice of the lisping outlaw.

"Blazes with boss! I ain't goin' to sit here and get gangrene. I'm goin' to town to see the doctor!"

The door slammed and in a few moments Hardtack heard a horse ridden off at a furious gallop. An unvoiced prayer was in Hardtack's heart.

CHAPTER XVI

Back-Trailing

EARLY morning sun was bright and warm on Lieutenant Bainter's back as he jogged thoughtfully along the dim wagon trail that led to his aunt's Rocking R spread. But it is doubtful if the sober-faced Texan was conscious of the sun. He was virtually unaware of the occasional twinges of pain from the bullet wound in his forearm. And less of the bright crimson that continued to soak into the white kerchief he had bound around the gash.

His mind was on his recent interview with Major Harris. There was no doubt he had seriously disturbed the banker.

"So I figgered it was too simple," he muttered.

Now he was almost convinced that the Major was responsible for the frame-up. Which meant that the distinguished-looking business man was behind the raid on the pool herd, had instigated the mob action at Aunt Martha's and had sent his gang to break Hardtack and himself out of the calaboose in order to hang them.

Proof? That was the trouble. He didn't have a vestige of proof, nothing that would stand up in court. Nothing at all except his sure knowledge that the Major had undergone a certain indefinable change when the gang had been mentioned, when the gunny called Sam, leader of the hang-mob, when the Canyon in the Sand, had been mentioned. Yes, the Major had known what he, Bainter, was talking about. But how to prove it?

As he loped into the ranch-yard, Jane Taylor came out on the porch. For a moment Bainter caught his breath and stared at her. He suddenly forgot about Major Harris.

This early morning, Jane Taylor was beautiful. There was a touch of glistening dew in her black eyes, and a glint of sun in her jet hair. There was an eager curve to her half-smiling lips, and a flash of even white teeth.

There was something about her, something alive and quick that moved Bainter deeply. Perhaps it was her assured, lithe stride. Per-

haps . . . Whatever it was, he stared at her, and his pulses raced.

"Hello, Tobe," she greeted, a little flushed as she became aware of his continued gaze. "What brings you out of jail this fine morning?"

He grinned, swung down out leather. "Howdy, Jane. Yuh're even prettier in the mornin' than yuh are at night."

The red in her cheeks deepened. Then she saw his arm.

"Tobe!" she cried, concern in her face. "You're hurt."

"Nothin' much," he said. "Did Hardtack get in?"

"Hardtack?" she said. "No. Come up. Let me fix your arm."

Bainter felt a presentiment of trouble where Hardtack was concerned. But it disappeared when Jane went to work on his wound. Her hands were deft and their touch soothing. In a short time, she had cleansed the gash, stopped the flow of blood and bandaged the injury neatly.

"How'd you get it?" she asked suddenly.

"Had a little argument with the Major," he replied. He saw her pale as the blood drained from her face. "I take it yuh don't exactly care for that hombre."

She shook her head, but didn't speak.

"Say, Jane," he said, a smile flitting across his face, "how would yuh like Army life?"

She looked up, startled. "What do you mean?"

"Well," he replied, "I was with the Army once. And I'm thinkin' of goin' back. Jane—"

"Tobe!" his aunt's dry, friendly voice broke in. She had entered quietly. "What are you doing here?" Her gray eyes darted keenly from one of them to the other.

"There was somethin' I wanted to ask Jane, Aunt Martha," he said, and saw that Jane Taylor was flushing to the roots of her hair. Then she hastily went to the window.

Briefly Bainter told his aunt of the past night's events, without mentioning his visit to Major Harris. As he concluded Jane called from the window:

"Someone's coming. Oh, its Fred Webber! And he seems to be in a hurry."

"My hoss!" cried Bainter, rising. "I ain't goin' back to the calaboose yet."

"I put it behind the house, Tobe," said his aunt. "Stay here. I'll go out to see what Fred Webber wants." She went to the doorway and stood there.

"Aunt Martha!" Bainter heard the bulky man yell. "Yore nephew broke loose last night. Seems like his gang busted into the jail and got him out. Even took the Sheriff with 'em. And Walters ain't showed up yet. Just thought I'd tell yuh, 'cause people are gettin' kind of het up again."

"Aunt Martha," whispered Bainter quickly, "don't tell him what I told yuh. Just ask him how he knows—how he found out—who told him?"

"How'd you learn this, Webber?" demanded Martha Reardon in a brittle voice. "Seein' that the sheriff ain't back yet?"

"Well," said the big man, hesitating. "Everybody could see the jail was empty. Besides, Del Sabin happened to be in town last night when the raid on the calaboose was pulled off. He saw it all."

"Maybe you'd better wait until Sheriff Walters comes back," suggested Martha Reardon coldly, "before you decide what happened."

"Don't have to," Webber called back. "Well, just thought I'd tell yuh."

HE SPURRED his mount. The horses hoofs pounded away in the distance.

"Del Sabin," muttered Bainter, a smile coming to his face. "I reckon that proves it —to me."

Suddenly the smile receded. He reached for his sombrero on the table. The two women faced him.

"Where are you going, Tobe?" his aunt asked.

"Got a hunch the Sheriff ain't comin' back," he replied, "unless somebody calls for him." His eyes narrowed. "I bet that goes for Hardtack, too," he muttered.

"Be careful, Tobe," said his aunt, her gaze warm on his face.

"Shore."

He grinned and kissed her cheeks. He turned, and found Jane Taylor staring at him. Her lips moved, but he could not hear what she was saying. In a blinding flash, he knew she was repeating the words of his aunt.

Scarcely knowing how it happened, he suddenly had her in his arms. For a moment the world tossed, then stood still as they kissed. When he released her, her face was flushed again, and her heart was in her beautiful black eyes. And now he heard clearly what she was saying.

"Be careful, Tobe."

With one last look at her, Bainter ran from the house and leaped into saddle. He lashed his horse across the flanks. The animal increased its speed, bounded ahead.

"Faster—faster!" something shouted in Bainter's brains.

Impatience roweled him. A mounting sense of foreboding made his nerves raw. Something had happened to Hardtack and to the Sheriff—he was sure of it. He began to feel sorry he let Hardtack head back last night to trail the gang of gunnies.

Faster! It seemed a year before the town of Winton loomed ahead in the flashing sunlight. Bainter swerved his horse, circled the town. In ten minutes, he was in the clearing under the tree where the torches had been planted the night before. From here he back-tracked to the spot where he had unsaddled the masked rider with whom he had changed places.

Even before he slipped out of leather, he saw why the sheriff had failed to put in an appearance at the cottonwood party. The marks of a violent struggle were plain in the dust.

In the same dust he read that the masked gunny had *not* been knocked out. He had, in fact, jumped the sheriff and evidently succeeded in subduing him after a terrific battle. Bainter arose, a look of bitterness on his face. The Sheriff was a prisoner of the outlaw gang!

Where were they keeping him? And where was Hardtack?

The thud of a galloping horse, headed toward town, brought Bainter around. Swiftly he drew his mount into the thicket beside the trail and waited. In a few moments, a dust-stained, black-garbed rider darted past on a heaving, befoamed mount. His face wore a strained look.

Bainter's eyes suddenly narrowed. The rider nursed a bandaged right hand! Could this be the man he had wounded?

In a flash, Bainter flung astride his horse and whirled townward in the dust of the other man's horse. He pulled up short beside a tree at the town's edge. His gray eyes flicked down the street. Empty! Keen disappointment stabbed him.

Then he caught sight of the lathered horse standing hitched to the town doctor's tie-post. Quickly he wheeled his mount, sped back on the trail. Angling off, Bainter fought his way through brush that hacked and slashed at his face and tore his clothes. Then he was in the clear, behind a row of buildings and houses.

His horse showered stones in a sliding stop. But Bainter was already off and running. It was still morning and cool shadows lay in the alleys. The fast-stepping Texan snaked into one of these, hugged the wall and came up underneath an open window. A lisping, anxious voice came through clearly.

"It ain't gangrene, Doc, is it? My gun went off by accident."

"Gangrene?" said a calm, educated voice, obviously the doctor's. "We'll see when we get the bandage off."

"Yuh mean these red streaks don't mean nothin'?" demanded the patient.

"Those are just the normal inflammation marks," said the doctor. "Let's see. No, you haven't got gangrene. Just a—"

"Why that lyin' old sojer," exclaimed the lisping man.

A GRIM smile twisted Bainter's lips. This was the one all right. So they had picked up Hardtack, too! He was relieved to learn that the orderly was alive. Then his teeth gritted. If anything happened to him, he would—

He ran back along the wall. This wounded gunslick was going to lead him to where Hardtack was being held. And very likely, the Sheriff, too.

He mounted and sped back. Soon he drew rein at the tree at the edge of the town. He nodded, catching sight of the horse still standing in front of the doctor's house. He wondered if the outlaw would immediately return.

Bainter's question was soon answered. The freshly bandaged man came out, lifted into saddle, cast a long, lingering glance toward the saloon diagonally across the street, then cantered toward Bainter.

Fading back, the lean-jawed Texan arrived at the cottonwood tree, drew his gun, waited. The wounded gunny, a man with a flat face and shifty eyes, drifted into sight, riding slowly.

"Reach, hombre!" called Bainter.

The rider's mouth gaped open, revealing three missing front teeth, as he looked in the fist-locked gun in Bainter's hand. Then he recognized his accoster.

"You!" he gasped. His hands moved up fast.

"Talk quick, hombre," ordered Bainter in a cold, flat voice. "And talk straight. Where are yuh keepin' the old soldier and the Sheriff?"

"I don't know," the man said sullenly.

"I'm givin' yuh three seconds to make up yore mind," said Bainter evenly. "That hand is goin' to be pretty messy with another slug in it. Shore gangrene."

The outlaw's face went pasty-colored.

"Don't do it!" He cringed. "I'll tell yuh. It ain't nothin' off my back. They're both in a shack in yonder foot-hills."

"Who's keepin' 'em there?" demanded Bainter.

"Just two of the boys," lisped the outlaw hastily.

"Where's the rest of the gang?" asked Bainter, inexorable.

"Don't know."

"Talk!" rasped Bainter.

"Honest," cried the outlaw, "I don't know. They just rode off this mornin'. Didn't say where, or when they're comin' back."

"Who yuh workin' for?" demanded Bainter.

"Don't know that, either," replied the outlaw feverishly. "I'm a stranger in these parts. Drifted into town the other night, and an hombre by the name of Del put me on. But he ain't the big boss. If I'd known we was aimin' at cottonwood parties an' kidnapin' sheriffs, I'd never have joined up."

Bainter nodded slightly. This man was small fry. He knew the type, and was convinced the fellow spoke the truth, for the most part. Everything rang true, except the outlaw's attempt to clear himself. He moved up and took the renegade's gun.

"All right," ordered Bainter. "Haul 'em down and get movin'. We're ridin' out to this here shack. Now don't try no funny business, hombre. The slugs in this here gun ain't particular who they let daylight through."

Sullenly, the outlaw drew down his arms and prodded his horse.

For nearly an hour they made their way across rolling country, heading, Bainter noticed, toward the crook in the Elbow Range. The hot sun swung up a blue-burnished sky, riding toward noontime.

The country became broken, with brush tangle, tree stands, rocky patchs. Suddenly the outlaw brought his horse to a halt.

"What's on yore mind, hombre?" demanded Bainter.

"The shack's just beyond the next clump of trees," replied the lisping outlaw. "Yuh can see the corral from here."

"Yeah," muttered Bainter, whose keen eyes had already picked out the corral. There were three horses running loose inside. "So what about it?"

"This is what about it!" cried the outlaw, desperation in his voice. "I told yuh the truth about everything and brought yuh straight here. I don't want to get mixed up in no killin's. I'm through with 'em. I just want to get out of this country. Yuh let me go, and I swear I'll clear out."

For a moment, Bainter hesitated. The appeal in the outlaw's voice touched him. Then he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said. "Can't take a chance. You and me are footin' it the rest of the way. If they yell out, tell 'em it's you and Sam. Don't forget—this gun is goin' to be stickin' into yore back, so don't make no slips."

"Don't do it," begged the slobbering outlaw. "They'll kill me!"

"Not if yuh do like I say," said Bainter. "Now get down."

Unwillingly, the terrified outlaw dismounted and, prodded by Bainter's gun, started walking toward the tree clump. In a moment, the two men were swallowed up in the shadows.

CHAPTER XVII

Raid and Counter Raid

ON THE fringe of the tree belt, Bainter halted his prisoner. Directly across the sun-swept clearing was a rickety-looking shack. The place seemed deserted, yet a thin trickle of whitish smoke lifting from the chimney told otherwise.

Bainter hesitated only briefly. He was certain the outlaw hadn't lied about the number of men guarding the prisoners. And the three horses in the corral seemed to corroborate the story. One of the horses belonged to Hardtack.

Yet there was always the possibility of a trap. Always the chance other outlaws had returned, and left their mounts beyond the shack.

But a deep sense of urgency pressed on the lean-jawed Texan. Time was important now, and haste imperative. He shrugged fatalistically and prodded the outlaw. Into the bright clearing stepped the two men.

Bainter walked slightly behind and to the left of his prisoner, his sombrero well down over his face. Seconds seemed to crawl sluggishly as the men moved toward the cabin. Their boots crunched into the dust.

They were three-quarters of the distance across when the scrape of a chair sounded from inside the cabin and the door was sud-

denly flung open. A slim man stood there, blinking in the sunlight.

"Oh, it's you, Ed," he exclaimed, relieved. "Didn't hear yore hoss. Who's that with yuh?"

Bainter's lips went taut behind the kerchief he covered his features with, and pretended to be wiping his face. He pressed the gun-muzzle hard into his prisoner's spine.

"It—it's Sam," gulped the lisping outlaw.

"Oh," muttered the man at the door, still blinking. "About time yuh got back. Say, what'd yuh do, Sam—change yore clothes?"

By this time, Bainter and the outlaw called Ed had arrived at the door, forcing the thin man there to step aside and let them enter. As they did, Bainter switched positions and moved to the right of Ed, putting the outlaw with the missing teeth between him and the other.

Just as they crossed the threshold, Ed suddenly shouted:

"It's the cowboy! He made me do it!" He made a dive for the floor.

But Bainter was ready for him. As he swung from left to right behind his prisoner, he fastened his left hand in a steel-like grip on the man's shirt, near the neck.

He'd had time for only a glimpse of the shack's interior, but that quick glance had shown him that the Sheriff and Hardtack, both hobbled and blindfolded, were seated in a corner. At a rough-hewn table on the other side of the room sat a hard-faced man, with a pack of cards in his hand. His deal had evidently been interrupted, and he was scowling at the door.

Then bedlam burst loose. Simultaneously with Ed's excited, explosive scream, the outlaw at the table caught sight of the gun that suddenly protruded from Bainter's right fist. In a flash he dropped the deck and jumped back, mouthing curses. Yanking out his six-shooters, he fired fast across the table.

The shots made a despairing sound in the cabin, echoing Bainter's own, as he fired. The man at the table screamed horribly and tried to trigger his guns again. But he suddenly slumped forward, twitching spasmodically, and crashed onto the table. The table toppled and the lead-tormented outlaw slammed to the floor with it. Then he rolled over on his back and lay still, his glazing eyes staring unseeing at the ceiling, a small, bluish hole in the center of his forehead.

Bainter was not paying him attention any longer. What he was seeing was that the man's slugs which had ripped across the shack at him had found another target—in the lisping, fear-maddened outlaw named Ed.

Ed had tried to tear himself away from Bainter, but the Texan's grip on his shirt had pulled him back, held him erect. Then all at once, he slumped in Bainter's grasp, coughed hollowly, and died. Two bullets had caught him squarely in the chest.

Bainter was caught slightly off guard when Ed's limp form slid down, and he found himself gripping a shirt which was pulling loose, so that a stabbing finger of red-hot agony from another roaring shot caught him in the left shoulder. For a breath the cabin spun and was almost blacked out for him. He fought back rising nausea.

The shot had been fired by the man who had been at the door. At Ed's words, he had slid back against the wall, and had instantly drawn and fired. Missing, he fired again and this time he had caught Bainter in the shoulder. With a wolfish howl of triumph he fired again.

RECOVERING swiftly, Bainter loosed his grip on the dead outlaw and lunged aside, snapping a shot as he did. Again hot lead found him, this time in the thigh. Searing pain ripped him, crashed him to the floor. For a moment he lay panting, helpless, expecting the finishing shot.

But it never came. A sudden silence descended on the cabin. Vaguely Bainter realized that the remaining outlaw's howl had been abruptly broken off. Gasping with the effort and with pain nearly blinding him, Bainter pushed up on an elbow.

Through swirling, acrid-smelling gunsmoke he saw the outlaw, leaning casually against the wall over on the opposite side of the room. For a moment, his brain failed to grasp what he saw. Then as the outlaw dropped his guns and slid down the wall, he realized his last shot had found the gunny. A red blotch had blossomed over the slim renegade's heart.

The outlaw came down in a sitting position, leaned over gently, then sprawled out—dead.

"Tobe—Tobe!" shouted Hardtack anxiously from the corner. "You all right?"

"Shore," Bainter assured with gritted teeth. "Get yuh loose in a minute."

Slowly, with sweat beading his forehead, Bainter got up and lurched toward the prisoners. His wounds were sodden, the pain excruciating, blinding.

Somewhere he found a knife and with fum-

bling fingers sawed loose Hardtack's bonds. Then he keeled over. Dimly he heard Hardtack's shout as the orderly tore off his blindfold and released the Sheriff.

Bainter's mind lost the details, but he realized they were carrying him out of the shack, piling him on a horse. Then began a long, torturing ride with Hardtack keeping the lieutenant from slumping.

Remotely, he knew when they had left the foot-hills and were riding through the Basin bottom. Then, all at once, shots rent the air from a distance, and following them came the sounds of thundering hoofs.

"The rest of the gang, Sheriff!" Hardtack yelled shrilly. "We got to hightail out of here. Hold on, Tobe! We're movin'!"

"We can't make town," called the Sheriff. "They'll cut us off. But we *can* make the troop camp, this side of town."

That ride became a picture that swiftly grew blurred to Bainter. The sun seemed blood-red as it covered the high-grassed Basin land. Beside him, riding furiously, and turning to shoot, were Hardtack and Sheriff Walters. Beyond, in the shadow of the Elbow Range, killers were riding a murder trail.

Fiercely Bainter cursed his seeping strength. Alternating waves of agonized pain and nausea rolled over him. Hot tides shot from his shoulder and thigh—then numbness, then all but unbearable pain again. His head sagged. Hardtack braced him.

"Easy, Tobe!" he shouted. "Ain't far to go." Again Hardtack turned and triggered his gun at the running band of killers. They were drawing nearer, their shots showering dirt at the horses' hoofs.

After that, Bainter recalled little of the tortuous run. Hot shadows haunted his pain-filled eyes. His dry lips cracked and bled. His throat was parched. Fiery pain flamed through his aching body with each jarring stride of the horse. Dust and wind lashed his fevered face.

Moans of pain welled up in him, but grimly he clenched his teeth, fought them back. Instead, wild laughter issued from his mouth. The charge at Antietam was before his eyes again, the thunderous crash of cannon, the roar of rifles, and the famed Rebel yell was in his ears. Then in his fevered imagination Major Harris' too close-set eyes were fixed on him, with fiendish laughter in them. That faded, and he felt the soft, yielding pressure of lips on his—Jane's lips.

A swift succession of unconnected kaleidoscopic pictures swept before him. He saw the burning store, the forged bills of sale, Colonel Chester's angry face, Juan Pancho, sneering, oily, his uncle Jim, the dead bank teller, the hold-up, the Canyon.

Then, out of the haze in front of his eyes, there suddenly loomed a strangely familiar sight—a neat row of Army tents, a troop bivouac.

He laughed again. It was too incredible to be real. Then, too dizzy to hold on any longer, he slipped out of saddle and knew no more. . . .

THE heat of the day was breaking up before the swift-advancing shadows of evening that stretched across the Basin when Bainter struggled back to consciousness.

His head was burning hot and a mist hung before his eyes. Vainly he tried to brush it away. Pain flared through him with breath-taking ferocity. A moan escaped his lips.

Hardtack suddenly sheared through the mist and was beside him.

"It's all right, Tobe," he heard his orderly say, as in a dream. "We're back in the Army again, and safe. Here—drink this broth."

Too sick to answer, Bainter let the hot liquid pour down his throat. Vaguely he wondered how he got back to the Army, and what Colonel Chester was going to say to him.

Then his eyelids became too heavy and he let them fall. He drowsed off.

That night, fever and pain ransacked Bainter. Flaming pincers ripped through him, tore at his flesh, mangled his body. In his delirium he cried out in torment.

He struggled to sit up, glassy-eyed, babbling. But strong hands forced him back on the cool pillow. And wet towels were put to his head.

All through that night, his faithful orderly and friend kept a ceaseless vigil, changing the towels, bathing his face and body.

The night stretched out endlessly, but finally overreached itself. Then it drew back and the darkness lifted. And, like water being absorbed into a sponge, it vanished into the day.

But Bainter did not awake until long after dawn. When he did, however, his mind was clear and the haze before his eyes was gone. He still felt feverish, and pain still gripped his shoulder and thigh, but it was bearable now.

He gazed around curiously. He saw he was in a large, wooden-floored Army tent, lying on an Army cot. A small table stood

against the center post and on it were several medicine bottles and a fresh supply of towels. On the table also lay two shapeless leaden pellets.

Bainter smiled faintly. "Must be the ones they dug out of me," he muttered.

A shadow loomed at the flap opening. It was Hardtack. After the orderly had given him a drink, Bainter asked what had happened.

Briefly Hardtack told how they had barely made the Army camp. And when Sheriff Walters had informed Captain Stack, the Commanding Officer, who their pursuers were, some yellow-legs had been sent after the outlaws. But the renegades had already taken to the hills.

The Army surgeon stationed temporarily with the troop, Hardtack said, had removed the bullets from Bainter's shoulder and thigh.

"But he said it'd be a week before yuh could get about, Tobe," Hardtack informed.

Bainter slept the rest of the day, being wakened only to be fed more hot broth. Toward evening he awoke again. His fever had mounted, but he found that he still remained lucid.

"The Sheriff was back," Hardtack told him. "Said the town's up in arms against yuh. They're after yore hide. Only they don't know where yuh are—yet. Sheriff said this is the best place for yuh."

"Did yuh tell Captain Stack who we were?" Bainter asked.

"No," replied Hardtack. "Just told him we used to be sojers."

Bainter nodded. "Good. If he knew, and a posse came out of town after us, he'd have to turn us over to Colonel Chester. I ain't ready for that yet."

"But how's a posse goin' to find out we're here?" demanded the orderly, frowning. "Them killers ain't going to ride into town and make an announcement."

Bainter smiled thinly. "No," he said. "But in a couple of days, the town's goin' to find out." He didn't answer the question in Hardtack's eyes, but asked one himself. "Did the Sheriff tell my Aunt Martha—and Jane—what happened?"

"Yeah," replied Hardtack, squinting at him queerly. "Both of 'em wanted to rush right over. But the Sheriff was against it. Said somebody might see 'em comin' and goin', and get suspicious."

"The Sheriff's right," muttered Bainter.

Then he became drowsy again and fell into another deep sleep. . . .

WHEN Lieutenant Bainter awoke in the morning his fever was completely gone, and the pain had eased considerably. His leg and shoulder were swollen, but he knew that within a few days the swelling would subside.

Despite Hardtack's protests, Bainter sat up on the edge of the cot. For a moment he swayed dizzily, but remained upright.

"Get Captain Stack," he told Hardtack.

The orderly, puzzled, went out.

"Got to move first," muttered Bainter.

That was the first thing that had flashed into his mind when he had awakened. It kept pounding away at him like mad. He had to strike before the Major did, before the man could gather his dispersed forces to a new blow.

Not a fragment of material proof that could be presented in court, yet, but nevertheless tangible proof kept piling up. That Major Harris was the directing spirit behind the evil that had befallen the Basin and himself, Bainter was assured, and he was grimly determined to get proof that would convince others.

In the proof that was already convincing enough for Bainter himself was the lie about Sabin being a witness to the killer-gang's freeing the Texan from the calaboose, and calling them Bainter's own gang. Then there was the admission of the lisping killer, now dead unfortunately, that he had been "put on" by someone named Del.

A step sounded outside the tent, and a uniformed man entered.

"Captain Stack—at your service, sir."

The Captain was a blond, smooth-shaven, blue-eyed man, with a glint of deviltry in his eyes. Bainter liked him at once, and instantly changed his mind—and plans.

"Hardtack," he said to the orderly, "dig out of my boot the letter Colonel Chester gave me. Give it to the Captain."

Hardtack obeyed, and handed the folded note to the puzzled officer. Captain Stack's frown vanished as he read the letter and a smile took its place. He rose, clicked his heels, and saluted.

"Lieutenant Bainter. On furlough, huh?"

Smiling, Bainter returned the salute.

"How would yuh like some action, Captain?" asked Bainter.

The Captain grinned. "That's music to my ears, Lieutenant," he said. "Since we've been here, all we been doing is chasin' Comanches we can't find. My men are out on a morning patrol, but they'll be back soon."

"This ain't against Comanches," said Bain-

ter. "But against white killers who are—"

At the sudden burst of pounding hoofs that fell on his ears as a horse came racing into camp he stopped short.

"It's the Sheriff!" announced Hardtack, gazing out of the flap-opening.

In a moment, Sheriff Walters burst in. His eyes were blazing, but his face was strangely pale.

"Captain Stack," he exclaimed. "Comanches raided last night. They got two women—"

"Jane—Aunt Martha!" Bainter burst out. Cold crawled along his spine.

Bleakly, the sheriff nodded.

Bainter staggered to his feet, the last drop of blood drained from his face.

"I'm goin' after them killers!" he cried hoarsely.

"Yuh can't do it, Tobe!" yelled Hardtack. "It'll kill yuh."

"Load me into a saddle. I'll hang and rattle somehow."

Against the protests of Sheriff Walters and Captain Stack, Bainter stood firm. So horses were saddled, packs rolled and canteens filled. Bainter was carried out to his horse and lifted into saddle, gritting his teeth against the stabbing pain.

"I'll send my troop after you as soon as they get back," promised Captain Stack. "Good luck!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Burning Sands

PAIN racked Bainter's body like a firebrand, in the blistering sun. The ride past the town and to the Rocking R where he had picked up the trail of the raiding Comanches had been bad enough, but now that he had poked his horse's nose into the Staked Plains, it had become sheer torture.

Heat and dust swelled up from the parched sands, baking horse and rider dry. He clung to the kak horn with a tight grip, his eyes bloodshot, staring, sunken. From some unknown reserve he drew the strength to go on.

For hours they followed the Indian trail. The unshod hoof marks pointed straight west—across the vast expanse of the Staked Plains. By now, Bainter's throbbing muscles and aching body had succumbed to a paralyzing numbness. And his mind to a dull stupor. If Hardtack's arm had not reached out a score of times, the lieutenant would have toppled from the saddle.

Mercifully, night came. The molten sun tilted over the scarlet horizon and vanished. Bainter slipped out of saddle and lay where he fell. Hardtack held the canteen to Bainter's cracked lips and spilled water down his throat. Then he threw a blanket over him.

Bainter slept like a dead man, never stirring from his position. When he awoke the next morning he felt somewhat stronger. His mind had cleared. After a brief breakfast, he climbed into saddle.

His leg was stiff, sore and swollen, and his shoulder achy. But his seat in the saddle was steadier.

"See where them tracks are headin', Hardtack?" he asked, in a voice so hoarse and croaking he couldn't recognize it as his own.

"Straight to the Canyon, looks like," agreed the orderly.

The sun came up, hung low and fiery in a dazzling sky. This day was hotter than the one that had preceded it. Gaunt and unshaven, the two men rode over the barren desert. Dust and sweat smeared their clothes, streaked their faces. With parched throats and noses clogged, coughing, choking, they followed the simmering sand trail.

Again ragged pain jabbed through Bainter. Hollow-eyed, bearded, he was a caricature of himself. The scorching sun was setting his brain aflame. His tongue swelled and it became difficult to force water down his throat.

Hardtack tried to keep his spirits up by croaking off-key, a doleful ditty that ended with each verse:

> He was young and brave and fair,
> But the Injuns raised his hair.

A sand-storm blew up. Men and horses burrowed deep into the sands. Bainter and Hardtack tied kerchiefs over their faces. It had been difficult to breathe before, but it appeared to be impossible now.

The air was still and sultry, the sun a leaden ball in the sky. For hours the sands swirled about them, pelted their skins, clogged their pores, whipped their bodies.

Then it ceased, as suddenly as it had come up. And the desert lay hot and trackless.

Rage flared through Bainter's dazed brain. The trail had been wiped out. But he forged on, trying to force himself not to think of what might happen to his aunt—to Jane.

"We ain't far to the Canyon, Tobe," croaked Hardtack, through cracked lips. "We'll shore find 'em there."

"Yeah," muttered the sunken-cheeked Texan. "We got to keep movin'. They got a twelve-hour start on us."

They plodded on into the sinking, blazing sun, their mounts, ribby, jaded scarecrows.

When night came Bainter told Hardtack: "We rest a while, then we move on."

Sheer will power and superhuman endurance dragged Bainter into the saddle that night—and kept him there. His pain-racked body protested every stride of the horse. His eyes popped with strain, his teeth were gritted. And despite the cool night breeze sweat beaded his face.

The moon rose, glistening, white. They stumbled on. As in a nightmare, Bainter suddenly heard Hardtack yell:

"Tobe, Tobe—the wagon! We're here!"

The battered bulk of an overturned wagon, charred and half-buried in the sand, showed in the moonlight. Chris Evers' ill-fated chuckwagon.

"Watch for a lookout," mumbled Bainter.

But there was no lookout at the Canyon entrance, and they made their way to the bottom without discovery. Cautiously they made camp at the far end of a rocky, broken stretch, watered their horses at the stream, ground-hobbled the mounts and rolled in their blankets. . . .

WHEN Bainter opened his eyes again, the morning sun was high. He sat up quickly—and groaned. Every muscle in his body ached. Then he noticed that Hardtack was gone.

As he looked out from behind the shade tree under which they had slept his eyes widened. An Indian camp was pitched further down in the canyon, and beyond the camp he could see a fair-sized herd of longhorns.

He stiffened as he saw a nearby bush move. There was no wind. Then he relaxed when Hardtack emerged. The orderly's eyes were glittering with excitement.

"They're here, Tobe!" he cried. "Both of 'em."

"Yuh saw 'em?" demanded Bainter eagerly. "Are they all right?"

"Yeah," replied Hardtack. "Sneaked over to have a look-see. Them redskins got 'em both in a tent, an' well-guarded, too."

Bainter sighed with relief.

"Know what I figger, Tobe?" said Hardtack.

"What?"

"Looks to me like they're keepin' 'em for somebody," said Hardtack. "The herd and the ladies."

"Yuh mean the Comanchero?"

"Yeah," Hardtack nodded. "I could see they're expectin' somebody."

"Mebbe yuh're right," Bainter said thoughtfully. "But Mexicans don't usually buy women from the Comanches. You know what happens to 'em." An involuntary shudder passed through him. He shook his head. "No, we'll have to go for 'em ourselves."

"It ain't goin' to be easy," Hardtack said dubiously.

"Tonight," muttered the gaunt-faced Texan. "Mebbe Captain Stack. . . No, he'd never find the Canyon."

To convince himself that Hardtack was right, Bainter snaked down to the Indian camp. Teepees were pitched in a valley clearing. He caught a brief glimpse of the two white women and saw that they were being kept secluded and protected. Satisfied, he returned.

The site Bainter and Hardtack had chosen for their own camp was virtually inaccessible, and there was little chance a wandering Indian would fall in on them. Because so much rest was needed the two men lay down again to rest their weary bones. And Bainter fell asleep.

He was roused in the late afternoon by Hardtack. He was feeling much stronger and although his wound ached and his joints were stiff, he knew he would soon be himself again.

"Them Injuns are gettin' excited," said the weathered orderly. "Looks like mebbe someone's comin'."

Bainter joined Hardtack at the look-out position behind a bush. There were obvious signs of activity in the Indian camp. A huge space had been cleared and half-naked horsemen kept flashing by, yelling, shouting.

Soon, the reason for their agitation became evident. A pack-train of heavily laden burros defiled into the canyon and descended the broad trail. Dark-skinned riders moved up and down the line. At the head of the train, riding a big black, was a squat, fattish man, expensively dressed.

"Juan Pancho!" Bainter said grimly. "I knew it! *He's* the Comanchero, the onery sidewinder."

"Wish we had Colonel Chester here," Hardtack Johnson said mournfully.

"We'll bring him here, and show him," promised Bainter. A hint of a smile touched

his face briefly. "Mebbe then he'll apologize to me."

There was nothing either of the soldiers could do about it all now, in the daytime, but at nightfall, they made their way cautiously to a point of vantage and watched the trading at the Indian camp.

Under other circumstances, Bainter thought, it might have been an interesting sight. Great fires had been built, and they cast dancing shadows and flickering light on the scene. And on the dark-faced, black-haired Mexicans and the cruel-eyed Comanches.

On colored blankets, the Mexicans, under the supervision of Juan Pancho, laid out their wares. With glittering eyes, the Indians gazed on them. Bolts of *manta* were piled high on the ground. Solemnly, the Comanche chief bent over them, the turkey-feather in his hair-band quivering. He stood up and nodded, satisfied.

Pancho spoke to one of his men who disappeared. In a moment, the man returned, staggering under a huge basket load. When Pancho nodded, the Mexican emptied the basket onto the blanket.

Great howls of delight went up and the Indians pounced on the contents of the basket, stuffing it into their mouths.

"*Panocha,*" whispered Bainter to the orderly crouched beside him. "A bread the Mexicans make that the Injuns like."

"Consarn 'em both," mumbled Hardtack.

A STEADY stream of supplies was laid on the blankets. Muskets, lead, ammunition, pistols, paint, beads, gewgaws. Then there was no more. The Comanche chief suddenly raised his hands.

"Ha!" Hardtack laughed softly. "The old geezer wants whisky."

"Pancho won't give it to him till he leaves," muttered Bainter, "If he wants to get out of here alive."

"Yuh're right," said Hardtack. "He ain't givin' it to him."

A chill coursed Bainter's spine as the Comanche whirled and pointed to the guarded teepee. A sudden silence fell on the camp, as a woman and a girl emerged in the clearing.

Bainter's heart leaped wildly at the sight of the graceful, black-eyed girl, and his aunt. If anything happened to them, he knew what he must do. Get through to them, and if he couldn't effect their escape, then shoot them both, rather than leave them to the Indians. He stiffened, his hand on gun-butt.

But nothing happened. It was evident the wily Comanche chieftain had used the woman and the girl to get the supply of whisky he knew Pancho had brought. But this failed. Bainter's Aunt Martha and Jane were returned to the tepee.

"What's the old buzzard sayin'?" asked Hardtack.

"That he won't give up them two till he gets the red-eye," growled Bainter. "Yeah, and Pancho's tellin' him they'll make the exchange tomorrer mornin'."

Lieutenant Bainter and his orderly returned to their own camp, but Bainter slept little, tortured by the thoughts of what the next day might bring. He finally drowsed off, but at dawn trampling hoofs and bawling cattle roused him. He leaped to his feet.

"Hardtack!" he yelled. "They're startin' the herd."

The orderly rolled out of his blanket and joined him at the look-out bush.

Early as it was, already the *vaqueros* were rounding up strays and beginning to chouse the longhorns up the Canyon entrance.

"Pancho's got the women, too!" whispered Hardtack excitedly.

Bainter's face was grim, tight-lipped. Up at the head of the herd rode the oily Mexican, the woman and the girl, and the Indian chieftain.

"Pancho's goin' to show him where he hid the whisky in the sands," muttered Bainter, with knowledge of this particular angle of the Comanchero trade. "Hardtack, reckon we'll have to wait here till night and the Injuns are dead to the world before we get out of here."

"Pancho can't travel too fast with the herd," rejoined the orderly meaningly.

To Bainter, the day seemed to stand still. The hawk-eyed little Hardtack, however, was philosophical.

"Can't do nothin' about it, Tobe," he pointed out. "Might as well take a rest. Do yuh good. . . Listen to them Injuns howl!"

Bainter, savagely pacing the hide-out, pulled up scowling, to listen. Yells, frenzied shouts rolled along the canyon walls.

"Cussed redskins," he muttered. "They'll finish that red-eye in an hour."

He threw himself on the ground. But he found rest impossible. He was still gaunt-faced and hollow-eyed, but the two days in the Canyon had renewed his strength. His wounds were still sore, but fresh energy flowed through him.

The Indians' supply of whisky, however, lasted through the day. And the roaring redskins who absorbed it lasted as long as

the supply, then they began to drop off, one by one. Night finally brought silence to the canyon.

"Look at 'em," muttered Bainter disgustedly, as they made their way warily toward the entrance. "Dead drunk." Across the clearing lay sprawled the unconscious forms of at least twenty Indians. "This blasted trade's got to be stopped! Them redskins are crazy for the stuff. When they sober up, they'll go raidin' for more longhorns and hosses, so's they can't get more of Pancho's red-eye. Hardtack, we got to catch up with that gent before sun-up."

The herd trail was easy to follow in the bright moonlight. Bainter, narrow-eyed, taut-faced, drove his horse mercilessly. The animal was fresh and the miles slipped under its hoofs.

"They're headin' for the Border," muttered Bainter.

"What are yuh goin' to do, Tobe" asked Hardtack, "when we catch 'em?"

Bainter's face was unpleasant in the moonlight. It was a queer, strained-looking.

"We'll see," he muttered. "We'll see."

On through the night rode Bainter, grim, vengeful. Trail marks grew fresher.

"The herd!" whispered Hardtack softly, when they topped a sand knob.

BEFORE them lay the bedded herd. Two *vaqueros,* riding the graveyard shift, sifted ghostlike around the cattle, singing softly.

Nearby, a fire flickered. Bainter nodded as he saw the recumbent forms of the two women, lying within its circle. Just beyond, propped against a boulder, sat a nodding guard. To the right, horses were hobbled.

A plan formed quickly in Bainter's mind, and in a few words he explained it to Hardtack.

"But what's goin' to happen to you, Tobe?" demanded the orderly anxiously.

"I'll meet yuh at the fort," Bainter said evenly. "If I don't make it, you lead the Colonel to the Canyon. Jane and Aunt Martha'll be yore proof against Pancho." A ghost of a smile wafted across his face. "Won't the Colonel be surprised?"

Bainter sneaked forward on the sands, a lariat clenched in his fist. Grimly, silently, he snaked his way toward the herd. Then he halted, burrowed behind a yucca shadow, and waited patiently.

Mutely chanting an old Mexican love-song, the *vaquero* near him circled the herd, oblivious to danger. Suddenly, a whirling loop whistled softly through the air. Before the *vaquero* could cry out the noose settled swiftly around his neck, tightened. Quietly the Mexican slipped out of saddle.

Bainter dragged the limp figure behind the spiny plant, bound and gagged it. Then he donned the *vaquero's* black sombrero and mounted the tough Mexican pony.

Bainter rode slowly, his face in deep shadow. His path crossed that of the other *vaquero.*

"Miguel—" the other rider began.

He must have sensed something wrong, for a yell of alarm sprang to his lips. It was suddenly throttled as the barrel of a Colt was brought down hard on his skull. There was a sickening crunch as steel met bone, and the *vaquero* wilted across the saddle horn.

A wiry figure leaped out of the shadows and pulled the Mexican from his horse. Hardtack Johnson mounted beside Bainter, his face split in a wide grin underneath a black sombrero.

"Now you head back behind the rise, Hardtack," Bainter said evenly. "When the camp clears, come out with the other two hosses, pick up Jane and Aunt Martha, and hightail to the Fort. *Sabe?*"

"Shore," muttered Hardtack Johnson, a queer glisten in his eyes. He seized Bainter's hand and wrung it. "Luck, Tobe."

CHAPTER XIX

Across the Border

WILD TEXAS longhorns can be started off on a stampede with little cause for it. Anything may do the trick. A sudden shift in the wind, a cutting horse badly handled, a scream in the dark. Anything.

There would have been no guessing the cause of the stampede that suddenly jerked Juan Pancho's herd of longhorns to their feet and sent them racing madly southward, had not an accident befallen Tobe Bainter.

Juan Pancho heard a low, moaning wail, followed by a dry, popping crackle. Then all was bedlam as bawling, bellowing cattle lurched to their feet and charged crazily off into the night. A ghostly horseman rode

their flanks, yelling them on, firing his gun over their tossing horns.

There was no stopping those maddened, fear-crazed steers once they were started. And the grim-riding phantom did not essay it. Instead he drove them relentlessly before him, exploding his gun in their ears, piling frenzy on fear.

The irresistible river of beef rolled on. But behind, in the camp of Juan Pancho, was confusion. The Mexicans ran for their ponies and swore and cursed when they found the reins knotted together. Surely their camp was bewitched.

Pancho fumed and yelled at them. The herd was already half a mile away—a mile! *Madre de Dios!* Would the accursed cattle never stop? Hurry!

A horse for the senor? *Seguramente*! Was he himself not risen from the ranks of the *vaqueros. Vamos!* But *los mujeres*—the ladies, *senor?*

Fools! Where can they run? The desert is big and empty. Let them stay at the fire. *Vamos!*

Through swirling clouds of dust raised by the stampeding longhorns, raced the dark-skinned *vaqueros* and their portly *patron.* Never once did they look behind. If they had, they might have seen a startling sight.

Out of the night, beyond the camp-fire, came a rider leading two horses. Quickly the ladies ran to him, mounted. Then swiftly the three rode off into the gloom.

But the Mexicans never turned. They sped onward, in the wake of the running herd. Already the cattle had fled miles. But the *vaqueros,* on their fast ponies, were cutting down the distance sharply.

Juan Pancho cursed at the top of his lungs. What was the matter with Miguel and Angel? Why couldn't they stop, turn the herd? He would teach the *cochons* a lesson they would soon not forget.

Madre de Dios! There was only one of them. What had happened to the other? Never mind—stop the herd!

The four *vaqueros* split their forces and raced along the flanks to mill the rampaging steers. Strange things happened to those who passed Miguel—surely it *was* Miguel. The night was indeed bewitched. They felt themselves plucked off their horses and suddenly cast to the ground. Barely did they have time to escape the thrashing hoofs of the longhorns. Time was lost as they ran for their ponies.

On and on across the desert flats roared the herd, their long spindly legs carrying them with amazing speed. And behind them, shouting hoarsely, vainly, rode Juan Pancho.

Suddenly he cried out in alarm. Was it Miguel whose horse stumbled and pitched to the sands? Wait, he would see! He pulled up to his fallen *vaquero.* Miguel's sombrero had fallen off and he looked strange in the moonlight as he attempted to sit up.

Then Juan Pancho pulled his gun and gave a hideous scream.

Bainter reached for his Colt. Too late. The shock had dazed him, slowed his draw. In that instant the universe seemed to blow up in front of his eyes. There was a trumpeting roar of gunfire, then screaming jabbering Mexicans swarmed over him, crushing him to the ground with horny fists and gun-barrels.

He lunged up, striving to tear loose from clawing hands, the tangled bodies. They clubbed him to the earth again, crushing him. He cursed his helplessness as he felt his strength drain away. Maddened with pain, bleeding, he fought back weakly, vainly.

His gun was gone, his limbs pinioned. Through a bloody haze he realized his hand and legs were being bound. Dimly, over Pancho's hoarse, guttural voice cursing at him, he still heard the rumble of stamping hoofs. His one hope and prayer was that Hardtack had succeeded.

AS FROM a distance he heard Pancho taunting him.

"So?" Pancho cried shrilly. "The *Americano* dog would play a joke on Pancho, ha?"

Bainter was too weary to answer.

"Son of a stupid pig!" yelled the Mexican, violently kicking out at Bainter. "You do not answer when Pancho speaks, ha?" He laughed, a hard laugh. "You will learn quickly where I take you. To my *rancho* across the Border. We will be in my country—Mejico. Remember, Senor Bainter?" Again he launched a booted foot at his helpless prisoner.

The rumbling earth suddenly became still, and Bainter realized the herd had been stopped. *Vaqueros* rode up to confirm it.

"*Bueno,*" growled Pancho. "Now, you two go back and bring the ladies here."

Hoof beats thudded softly into the sand, then died in the distance as the Mexicans rushed off to obey. Once more Bainter prayed wordlessly.

A fire was built and flames flickered on his face.

"It is strange, senor," a *vaquero* was say-

ing to Pancho. "Miguel and Angel are both missing."

"The Yankee is responsible," declared Pancho, with a curse. "I feel it in my bones. But we shall soon find out when—"

A faint yell rang through the night. Then a horse dashed up, and a *vaquero* flung himself from the saddle.

"They are gone!" he panted. "Gone!"

"What?" roared Pancho, scrambling to his feet. "On foot? Where?"

"No," cried the heaving *vaquero*. "They had horses. Three. Miguel's and Angel's and another. We found Miguel and Angel tied up."

Pancho mottled. He kicked Bainter in the ribs.

"Dog! Pig!" he roared. "Speak! Were are they? Where did you hide them?" He suddenly whirled to the *vaquero*. "Did Enrico follow their trail?"

"*Si*," replied the Mexican. "He followed immediately. I told him I would come back after I reported to you."

"*Bueno*," growled Pancho. "We must find the women. *Es necessario! Vaya*—wait! What is that?"

A wind-borne cry reached them. It echoed softly over the camp. But there was fear and alarm in it. Apprehension suddenly appeared in the faces of Pancho and his men. They stared at each other.

Madre de Dios! This night *was* bewitched. Unseen, the *vaqueros* crossed themselves.

Then the Mexican who was supposed to be following the women came flashing into camp. He slammed off his horse. Stark fear stamped his features.

"A troop of *Americanos*!" he cried. "They are many, and they follow us!"

His announcement fell like a clap of doom on the camp. Paralyzing panic gripped the Mexicans. With a roar, Pancho broke it.

"*Vamos!*" he shrieked, his face pale in the flickering firelight. "Enrico, throw the Yankee pig over your saddle. He will pay for this—with his life!"

"But the herd, Senor?" objected Enrico.

"To the devil with the herd!" roared Pancho. "*Vamos*!"

Bainter was only dimly aware that he was being loaded across a saddle. He felt relieved. The news of a troop meant that Jane and his aunt were safe. It must have been Captain Stack's troop.

Then the horse under him began to move and all Bainter could think of was that with every stride the fast-moving animal took a blinding wave of pain through his body that threatened to overwhelm him was loosed. Only by a thin thread did he hang on to consciousness.

The ride was a nightmare. His entire body became a single racking unit of pain. He did not know when they forded the sluggish Rio Grande and entered Mexico. Nor did he know when he was finally unloaded and unbound in front of a ten-foot adobe wall.

He only knew, in his nightmare dream, that he was being dragged through a grilled iron gate, across a mud-colored flagstone patio, past a heavy-carved portal into a gloomy, dank *hacienda*. Then along a stone-floored corridor, and finally thrown into a barred, unfurnished room. The door was slammed shut and locked behind him.

AS THE trampling herd stampeded off into the night, with the Mexicans chasing them, Hardtack Johnson emerged from behind the sandy rise, leading the two ponies.

"Miz Reardon!" he called. "Miss Taylor. It's me—Hardtack." They turned in amazement. "Hurry!" he urged. "No time to lose."

They answered with alacrity, swiftly mounted. They sped through the bright moonlight, riding at break-neck speed.

"Where's Tobe?" cried Jane Taylor, unable to contain herself any longer.

"Who do yuh think started that little stampede?" laughed the orderly.

That was all that was said during that ride, and until they unexpectedly burst into an Army bivouac, under the command of Captain Stack.

Briefly, quickly, Hardtack explained. Without delay, the Captain issued marching orders. An escort to take Mrs. Reardon and Miss Taylor back to the Basin in the morning; the rest of the troop to follow Hardtack Johnson—on the double quick.

"Hurry!" Jane Taylor called after them, standing pale and lovely in the moonlight. "Hurry!"

They back-tracked fast and came up with the herd at dawn, but the Mexicans who had rustled the braves were gone. They pressed on, Hardtack's hawk-eyes glued to the trail.

The Mexicans twisted, dodged, angled, in attempts to throw off their pursuers. But doggedly the yellow-legs kept on. Finally it settled down to a race for the Rio Grande.

The Mexicans won, but only by a few miles. Captain Stack's troop stopped at the river, and here Hardtack parted company with them. There would be no international incident if he, as a cowboy, were found in Mexico.

Behind a mesquite-topped sand hill, Hardtack watched the *vaqueros* carry Bainter into the adobe-walled *hacienda*. He had clung to their trail like a buzzard circling a dying man. Catching sight of the *hacienda* in the distance, he had hidden his mount in a rocky wash and crawled forward.

Impatience all but overcame necessary caution as he eyed the ten-foot wall in the gathering gloom. How was he going to dig Bainter out of that grave? Suddenly, something clicked in his mind.

"That'll do the trick!" he muttered, shaking his fist at the turret-shaped tower of the *hacienda*.

When night fell, Hardtack entered a little Mexican village he had passed while trailing the Mexicans. Mongrels snapped at his heels. Black-shawled women stared at him impudently. Jabbering peons conversed in doorways.

He dismounted and entered a *cantina*. At the bar he ordered *tequila*. After gulping it down, he asked the proprietor for what he had in mind.

"Horsehide rope and a horse, senor?" repeated the flabby owner. "*Si*—surely. Come this way, senor."

In a short while, Hardtack left the village with his purchases. He hid the two horses in the same rocky wash and slipped warily through the shadowy brush. Soon the wall of the *hacienda* loomed in the moonlight. Quickly he darted across the clearing into the shadow of the wall. He was at the rear of the house, he judged.

He put his ear against the adobe and listened intently. Silence. Unlooping the horsehide lariat, he gripped the large, heavy stone he had tied to one end and threw it lightly over the top of the wall. Then quietly, with a sawing motion, he began to pull the rope back and forth.

Small pieces of adobe showered down on him. In a few moments he ceased sawing and pulled hard on the rope. It held securely in the crack the horsehide had made.

In a jiffy, Hardtack had scaled the wall. Catlike, he landed inside the patio. He grinned. No guards were posted, no precautions had been taken. This far inside Mexico, Pancho had reason to feel safe.

Hugging the inside wall, the orderly snaked around, his hawk-eyes trying to penetrate the secrets of the darkened *hacienda*. Grilled window bars gleamed dully in the moonlight.

Chancing detection, Hardtack raced to the house. His heart in his mouth, he pulled himself up by the bars. By the light of the moon, he saw a figure lying on a straw pallet.

"Tobe!" he whispered. "Tobe!"

THE SLEEPER stirred, rose, and came to the window. Bainter gripped the bars, hope flooding his face.

"Hardtack!"

"Listen fast, Tobe," breathed the orderly. "I got a plan." Speedily he told his idea to Bainter. "The only thing is, can yuh get into the yard?"

"Shore," said Bainter, grinning suddenly. "Pancho's 'dobie-wallin' me at sun-up tomorrer."

Dismay came to Hardtack's face. Then it became grim.

"That just means I got to work faster. It'll be the east wall, Tobe. I'll put a stone up there. Don't forget, shove hard. And here's my gun, just in case."

The orderly slipped to the ground. Once more he darted across the lighted patio and along the wall. In seconds he was over and on the outside.

From then until dawn, Hardtack Johnson was a desperately busy man. With the horsehide rope he had bought at the Mexican village, he pulled the heavy stone back and forth until the crack in the wall ran straight to the ground. At a distance of two feet, he repeated the process. Now two parallel lines, almost invisible, were sawed in the adobe.

Just as dawn broke, Hardtack went back on a dead run to the wash, for the two horses. . . .

Lieutenant Bainter arose as the door of his cell was flung open. In the entrance stood Juan Pancho, grinning evilly, his yellow fanglike teeth showing. Behind him crowded half a dozen swarthy men, armed with carbines.

"The senor is not so happy today, ha?"

"Before yuh shoot me, Pancho," said Bainter evenly, "mebbe yuh can straighten me out on a couple of things?"

The Mexican shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "But the senor must hurry. We have not the whole day."

"That Comanche who was killed at the fort," said Bainter. "Was he yore spy?"

"You will soon be a dead Yankee, Bainter," said Pancho, smiling, "so it makes no difference. *Si*, the Indian was my spy. And I sent my men to recover the money you stole from me."

"Uh-huh." Bainter nodded. "And yuh forged them bills of sale—Taylor's and Reardon's?"

"Seguramente," said Pancho, with obvious pride. But his eyes were suddenly shifty. "A good job, no? Now, enough questions. To the patio with him, men."

Then Bainter knew that Pancho was lying. In a blinding flash, the truth came to him. The bank teller! What a fool he had been. But that opened up a whole new line of reasoning.

CHAPTER XX

Tables Turned

COOLLY BAINTER stepped into the patio, just as the sky crimsoned in the east and carved long, reddish pieces out of the sky bowl. But the Texan's gaze roved the adobe wall. He smiled faintly, when he caught sight of a rock near the wall top.

Leading, although apparently being led, Bainter marched directly toward that spot. As he turned his back to the wall, his keen eyes noted the two, thin parallel cracks in the wall, and the 'dobe-colored rope that was noosed head high around the slab formed by the wall between the two cracks.

Juan Pancho had taken a silk kerchief from his pocket and the six Mexicans, making up the firing squad, stood ready, carbine stocks resting on the ground.

"Unfortunately," Pancho said, grinning, "the *padre* is not here this morning."

"That's all right," replied Bainter. "I won't need him."

The smile faded from Pancho's face.

"Men!" he cried, raising the kerchief.

"Tobe!" Hardtack's whisper came through the wall.

"Let her go," Bainter said, from the side of his mouth.

"Here she comes!" yelled Hardtack.

Several things happened simultaneously. The shout from outside the wall startled the Mexicans. Then there was a jarring rumble and a large slab of wall suddenly toppled outward. The patio was filled with showering 'dobe, acrid dust. Shouts, cries rang through the morning air.

Bainter dug his gun from his shirt and fired as he leaped through the gaping opening. Before the amazed Mexicans could bring up their carbines, he was in the clear. In a flying leap he made the saddle of the horse Hardtack held for him. Then they broke for the bosque ahead, bending low, riding like demons, to escape the questing stream of lead thrown after them.

They spured and angled among the trees and thick, face-clawing brush. It was a wild run. But by back-tracking and riding in streams they threw off pursuit. They finally pulled rein in a dry, overhung arroyo. A wide grin was on Bainter's face.

"Yuh shore showed 'em somethin', Hardtack," he said. Then thoughtfully, "It'd kind of be a shame to go back and not bring the Colonel a present—after him givin' us a vacation."

The orderly suddenly grinned. "Shore," he said. . . .

Night found Bainter and Hardtack surveying Juan Pancho's *hacienda* from the mesquite-topped sand hill. They had discussed several methods of bringing the squat owner outside the adobe walls, but none had proved satisfactory. The wall, they noted idly, had been repaired.

"Looks like we may have to go over it and collect him," Bainter said.

Hardtack shook his head dubiously. "That ain't—"

"Wait!" Bainter put up a warning hand.

The chuff and clump of horses reached him. In a few moments, two riders came up toward the *hacienda* gate.

"Why, that's José!" exclaimed Bainter. "The Major's nephew!"

José halted in the shadows and his companion continued to the gate. He knocked and was admitted. After a few moments a man came out alone. Juan Pancho!

The Mexican gestured to José and, on foot, they made their way into the bosque. Silently Bainter and Hardtack snaked after them.

They trailed cautiously. In enemy territory, every shadow held the threat of death. Abruptly, the footsteps they followed ceased.

"Lost 'em," muttered Hardtack.

Then, to their left, a dull yellow light glimmered through the brush. They threaded past a tangle toward it. The dim outline of a lean-to lay ahead. Voices floated through the open window.

BAINTER moved up, and the voices became distinct. The two Mexicans inside were patently old friends and were commiserating each other. Their faces were yellow under the lamp. One face was small-

boned, thin; the other portly.

"What games we play, Juan," José was saying. "You, the *patron* of the *hacienda,* and I, the Major's nephew."

"It would touch my pride," confessed Pancho, "if the men knew I was not the owner, and only worked for a Yankee."

"A ruthless, diabolical rascal," José said fiercely, "who trusts no man. Who creates the fiction of a family in Mexico and that I am his nephew, so that his own men—that fool Sabin and the Basin people—will not suspect he is behind the Comanche trade."

Outside the window, under the ledge, Bainter stiffened.

"But enough," said Pancho. "What brings you, José?"

"The Major comes to claim his *hacienda,* Juan," replied José. "And his pretty *Americano* lady."

"But she is not here," declared Pancho. "The Comanches did their part, but—" In a thin, quavering voice, the swarthy-faced fat man told his visitor why. "That man *es diablo,*" he concluded.

"The Major will be very angry," said José, worried. He shrugged. "But everything is going wrong. The Sheriff asks questions. The ranchers pay their notes, and the Major becomes worried. So he will come here to stay, and bring with him all his herds. And you, Juan, the Major wants to load the burros with whisky only to take to the Canyon."

"Only?" asked Pancho, surprised.

"*Si,*" answered José, smiling. "The Major wants to make sure the Comanches do not take his herds. He does not care if they raid the Basin and take the large pool herd which the ranchers are rounding up to send across the Plains, but not his." He laughed. "And now"—José, arose—"the Major, and Maria, wait for my return."

"They'll just have to wait, José," said a cold, brittle voice from the window.

The two Mexicans jerked around like puppets, dumbfounded. Leaning casually on his elbows through the open window, was Tobe Bainter, a big Colt jutting from his fist.

With screams of rage, the two Mexicans dived for their guns. The lean-to roared with the burst of gunfire. Two shots echoed like one as they reverberated through the room.

As acrid gunsmoke drifted ceilingward, Bainter leaped in through the window and Hardtack tumbled past the door. It was their two guns which had spoken.

José lay wounded on the floor and Pancho, in his chair, was trying to stem the blood from an arm furrow.

"Is he hurt bad?" demanded Bainter, as Hardtack bent over José.

"He'll be all right," said the orderly.

"Now listen to me, you two," Bainter said quickly. "José, yuh did me a good turn once, and I'm sorry this happened. But I'll return the favor. Stay below the Rio Grande and I'll send Maria to yuh—that is, if yuh keep yore lip buttoned."

"Buttoned?" asked José, in a strained voice.

"Yuh'll *sabe*—just listen," said Bainter. "Now you, Pancho—yore men'll be here in a minute. When they come, tell 'em from the window to load the burros with whisky, like José said, and head 'em to the Canyon in the Sands. Say yuh'll meet 'em there."

For a moment, Juan Pancho sat staring stupidly.

"Get up, yuh fat lobo!" snapped Bainter. "My finger's just itchin' to let daylight through yore bloated carcass."

Fear swept through Pancho's boarlike, reddish eyes. He jumped to his feet, his face white, and ran to the window.

"*Si,*" he chattered. "*Si.*"

Already Bainter had heard a crashing in the brush. He turned swiftly to José now upright in a chair, pressing a bloody kerchief to his shoulder.

"Well, José?" he demanded.

Pain-filled black eyes turned on him.

"You are asking something difficult of José, *Americano,*" he said, panting. "To let my people go to their death." He hesitated, licked his lips, then nodded. "But I cannot lose Maria. I agree."

Cries rose from outside.

"Tell 'em it's all right, Pancho," clipped Bainter, prodding the Mexican with his gun, from the side.

"Pancho!" a voice outside yelled. "We heard guns!"

"It is nothing," said Pancho. "An accident."

"The whisky!" prodded Bainter.

"*Si,*" muttered Pancho. Then, trembling, he repeated Bainter's instructions. "And I will meet you there, *amigos. Vaya con Dios.*"

The men inside heard twigs snapping, brush crackling, movement. Then that faded into silence. . . .

AS DAWN cracked the eastern sky and shifted gray shadows over the earth, Bainter led his own small cavalcade down to the bank of the wide, sluggish river that lay between the two countries.

"José,"—Bainter turned to the slim Mexican—"yore countrymen will come back alive."

"Senor?" José's black eyes became hopeful.

"We want the leader," Bainter said thoughtfully. "The Major, Pancho. We'll let yore friends go, if they promise never to cross the river again."

"*Si, si*—they will promise," José said eagerly.

"All right," Bainter told him. "Yuh can head back now."

"*Adios*, Senor Bainter. *Mille gracias. Adios*, Juan."

José reined off and disappeared in the morning mists.

"Why'd yuh tell him that?" demanded Hardtack Johnson.

"That's what yuh'll tell Colonel Chester," said Bainter. "That it's the agreement we made with the Mexicans. It's easier to capture a drunken Indian than a sober one."

The orderly grinned. "Yeah," he agreed. "But what do yuh mean *I'll* tell the Colonel? Ain't you—"

"No," said Bainter. "Yuh'll lead the Colonel to the Canyon. I got other business, in the Basin."

The three horses slid down a cut-bank, thrashed through the current and gained the other side. Here, Bainter watched Hardtack lead his prisoner off toward the northwest. When they had topped the horizon and disappeared, he turned his own horse northeast. In the early morning light, his face was grim.

As much as he had suspected the Major's complicity in all that had been going on in the Basin, he had been stunned by the revelation that Major Harris was the Comanchero. The overheard conversation between Pancho and José had unwittingly bared a soul-sickening web of duplicity, bloodshed and treachery that shook Bainter to the depths.

With startling clarity he saw all the inexplicable, illogical events suddenly fall into place. For the first time, everything fitted, like a hand in an old glove. His uncle's death, the robbery, the frame-up, the necktie party, even Raven's death in the general store—all unrelated before, now grooved tightly.

The Major had diverted attention from himself by using his Mexican ranch as a base of operations. He furnished Pancho with supplies and the Mexican trafficked in herds stolen from the Basin cowmen. Then Pancho, armed with forged bills of sale, sold the cattle to the beef-hungry forts on the Pecos. "Slick scheme, all right," Bainter muttered, tight-lipped.

And the Major, responsible for inciting the Comanches to further raids and plunder by continuously supplying them with guns, ammunition and whisky, made the whole thing a vicious circle that squeezed the ranchers out of their spreads. And it was the Major who had depleted their herds and made certain they could not meet their notes.

Bainter wondered what kindly Providence had granted the Basin cowmen the wherewithal to keep the lobo wolf Harris from the door, even for a short time. And now they were sending another pool herd across the staked plains, not knowing it would be raided, perhaps before it started.

The thought prodded him on. . . .

Almost at the outskirts of Winton's main street, stood the printing shop of Ned Benson. It was a single room with a hand railing. Behind the rail was a hand press, a couple of type cases, some smudgy tins of black ink, and the other usual materials of a printer's business.

Shortly after nightfall the stoop-shouldered proprietor was closing for the night, when a horse stopped in front of his shop. The door opened and a bearded, red-eyed cowboy entered.

"Hello," said Benson. Then he stared. "Bainter!" he exclaimed, with a welcoming, glad note in his voice.

"Yeah," said the Texan. "Benson, did the pool herd start yet?"

"No," replied the printer. "Tomorrow morning. Bainter, I never believed what they said about you."

"Thanks," said Bainter, a smile creasing his sand-caked face. "There's a couple of

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questions I want to ask yuh, Benson. Then I got a job for yuh."

"I'll be glad to do it," the printer said promptly.

"Did yuh print bills of sale for Major Harris?" Bainter asked.

"Yes," said Benson, surprised. "As a matter fact, I was printing another batch only two weeks ago, when the Major cancelled the order. He paid me, and told me to destroy them." He shrugged. "But I use them for slip-sheets."

HE PICKED one off his press. Bainter held it under the light. He nodded. The printing "Bill of Sale" was identical.

This, then, was the reason that Harris had shot his bank teller—before the sheriff could get to him. He had been afraid the teller might confess he was forging the cowmen's names on blank bills of sale, to be filled in later with the number of stolen cattle, by Juan Pancho.

That had been the meaning of the sight he had witnessed at the bank that first morning. The teller had been practicing signatures, copying them from notes the Major had secured from the cowmen.

"How'd the Basin cowmen pay off their current notes?" Bainter asked.

"Haines collected a small claim. They split it. It just covered them."

"Where's the pool herd?"

"At your Aunt Martha's," said Benson.

"Hightail out there and tell 'em to throw a double guard around it," said Bainter. "Then round up every cowman in the Basin except the Major. To meet at Aunt Martha's."

Benson grabbed his hat. "Comanches?" he demanded.

Bainter hesitated briefly. If word of the real reason got around, it might tip his hand.

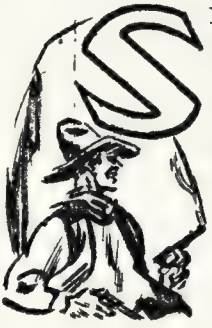
"Just tell 'em," he said, "it's the Sheriff's orders. And Benson—you suspected yore friend Raven was left to burn in his store, on purpose. Well, we're goin' to learn for shore tonight."

The door banged shut behind a galvanized printer, and he went flying for his horse. Bainter came out, mounted and rode slowly down the street, headed for the Sheriff's office.

A sudden glow in the sky caught his eye. With an abrupt, noisy hiss a frame building in the center of the town erupted in a blue-white sheet of flame. People poured out of buildings, yelling, shouting. Crowds milled toward the roaring, blazing edifice.

CHAPTER XXI

The Pay-Off



SPURRING his mount lightly, Bainter was riding fast when abruptly he pulled up short. He realized he had heard another noise simultaneously with that of the fire, but it hadn't registered on his brain until now. It was a dull, muffled boom, and had come from the store over to the right.

Above the store he made out the sign:

CLAIM COMMISSIONER

Behind pulled blinds, a dim light glowed.

A curious chill rippled along Bainter's spine. In the ill-lighted alley next to the store, three blurry forms emerged suddenly from a side door, carrying small, heavy bags. The momentary shaft of light revealed the surly features of Del Sabin.

Savagely Bainter flung himself out of leather. Taking the three steps before the door in a single jump, he burst through—the door was unlocked—and halted in his tracks. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Disorder reigned. The big iron safe in the corner, was shattered, a jagged hole ripped through the center. Papers were scattered, chairs overturned. And on the floor, a gruesome sight in death, lay white-haired Jess Haines, the Claim Commissioner, with bullet-holes in his chest.

The choked-up feeling in Bainter gave way to mounting rage and fury as he picked his way through the debris. Crumpled papers, he noticed, were clenched in Haines' hand. Stooping, Bainter loosed the dead man's grip with difficulty. They were two letters. He smoothed out the creases.

"I'll be hanged!" he muttered. "Thirty thousand dollars! So that's what the Major sent his killers after here!"

One letter was from the Government, noting that thirty thousand dollars had been sent in settlement of certain claims filed by Middle Concho Basin cowmen. The second letter was a brief note merely asking for an appointment with Haines at his office that night. The note was signed by Major Web Harris.

"He made shore the Commissioner would be here," muttered Bainter, with a curse.

But even with the muttering, a signal of warning suddenly clanged through Bainter's brain. He turned, his elbow bending back. But he was too late.

Leering at him in the dull light, was Del Sabin, a gun in his fist.

"Well—well!" Sabin grinned, his reddish eyes screwed up unpleasantly. "If it an't my old friend Bainter. Bet them are the two letters I came back for. Give 'em to me." He tore them from Bainter's hand, scanned them hastily. "Shore—these are the ones the Major wanted."

"Yuh bloody killer!" raged Bainter, in a red fury.

The burly man chortled. "Yuh couldn't have come at a better time Bainter. Yore gang robbin' and killin' the Commisioner, and me gettin' yuh, just as yuh're about to hightail. Too bad yore gang got away with the money. Well the Basin folk'll have a dead puncher instead of thirty thousand dollars. Fair exchange, huh?" He grinned again, enjoying his joke.

Bainter shrugged. "Reckon this is yore hand, Sabin," he said coolly. Time, his mind screamed. Waste time—talk! "Before yuh cash my chips," he said evenly, "tell me how come the Major framed *me!*"

"Yuh was gettin' in the Major's craw," said Sabin, with a smirk. "He didn't like the way yuh was lookin' at the Taylor girl. Anythin' else yuh want to know?"

"Yeah," said Bainter. "Raven's fire, and the robbery. The Major's idea too, huh?"

"Shore." Sabin grinned more widely. "Raven gave credit. And a Mexican friend told the Major yuh was carryin' enough *dinero* to pay all his notes. The Major said that wasn't businesslike and right imperlite on your part." He guffawed.

Bainter frowned. "One other thing puzzles me—how does the Major let the Comanches know when a herd's gettin' ready to make trail?"

"Simple, and smart," crowed Sabin. "That's the boss. He just lights up a smoke signal—like he done tonight." He thumbed at the fire down the street. "Two birds with one stone."

"Yuh mean the Comanches are raidin' tonight?" Bainter asked, trying to keep the breathlessness from his voice.

"Yeah," growled Sabin. "And I'm gettin' plumb tired of answerin' yore plumb fool questions."

A bead of sweat rolled down Bainter's forehead. The emotional pressure in the room became unbearable, crushing. His time was running out. Then, abruptly, he knew where his chance lay.

"Sabin," he said slowly, "yuh're a fool."

"Huh?" Sabin's pig-eyes widened. "What yuh mean by that?"

BAINTER smiled. He took a chance and let the smile grow wider.

"Spit it out!" rasped Sabin. "What yuh mean?"

"Mean?" Bainter drawled with deliberation. "I mean the Major's counted you out. He's leavin' the Basin."

"That's a lie!" yelled Sabin, angry red flooding his face.

"Then I reckon he didn't tell yuh," drawled Bainter, "why he pulled this off *tonight.*"

"That's a lie!" repeated the burly man.

Bainter laughed outright. "The Major's kept yuh in the dark, Sabin. He didn't tell yuh about his Mexican ranch did he? Or that José ain't his nephew, and that Mexican Pancho ain't his friend? They both work for him, like you do. Only he didn't trust you. Yore boss, Major Harris, has been carryin' on trade with the Comanches through Juan Pancho. Harris is the Comanchero. And now he's runnin' for his ranch across the Border because things are gettin' too hot for him here."

"That's a lie," said Sabin, for the third time. But now it lacked conviction. He licked his lips.

"It's all true." Bainter pressed his slight advantages. "Juan Pancho and José were caught and told on the Major. Harris'll never get out of the Basin alive. And neither will you, Sabin!"

Sabin's face drained of blood. His eyes shifted at the sound of a slight scrape behind him.

Watching, tensed, for just such a chance, Bainter lunged sideward with a whiplike motion, plucked his Colt in a miracle of speed and pulled the trigger. As he fired, he stumbled.

His shot beat Sabin's to the echo. But he missed. About to fire again, his trigger finger suddenly slacked.

Sabin's gun had gone off, but his aim had been deflected and the bullet crashed into the ceiling. Someone had crept up behind the man and knocked his arm up as he fired.

Crying out in stunned surprise, Sabin half-whirled around, then halted abruptly in

mid-swing as a heavy voice sternly ordered:

"Freeze, Sabin—an' drop the gun!"

Red pig-eyes popping, Del Sabin let the gun slip from his hand. It clattered to the floor. In an instant, a pair of steel handcuffs were snapped shut over Sabin's wrists.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Bainter said.

"Howdy, Tobe." The lawman nodded. His eyebrows lifted as he saw the carnage in the room, and the dead man. "They got here before me," he muttered.

"Yuh knew?" Bainter asked.

The lawman shook his head. "This afternoon Haines told me he got the money. Nobody else knew but the Major. I should have known the fire was just a plant. It was one of the Major's empty buildings."

"The Major ain't keepin' the money long," promised the gaunt-faced Texan soldier.

"No," agreed the Sheriff. "I was listenin' in to yore conversation with this hombre for some time. Found it mighty interestin'. So will the Basin folks." He shook his head. "Got so wrapped up in what yuh was sayin', I almost let the skunk plug yuh."

* * * * *

The stars wheeled through the sky. Far underneath them, a horseman sped across a plain in the night. He drove his horse unsparingly. And like an arrow released from it's bow, the animal shot to it's mark.

A row of military tents flashed up in the darkness.

"Halt!" challenged sentry, his Spencer ready. "Who goes there?"

"Lieutenant Bainter of the Ninth New Mexico Cavalry reporting to Captain Stack."

For an instant the sentry stared incerdulously at the dust-stained man in range garb. Then something in the visitors tone and bearing brought his arm up in a salute.

"Yes sir. This way, please."

Captain Stack's tent glowed yellow with a light in it. He looked up when the sentry pulled the flap. Surprised recognition flooded his face.

"Lieutenant Bainter—come in," he invited, smiling. . . .

It was a brief parley held there in the Captain's tent, but one of far-reaching possibilities. Shortly after its conclusion, noiseless activity spread through Captain Stack's troop of yellow-legs. Action, ran the word around the camp. A chance finally to come to grips with a tangible enemy. A joyous note hummed in the tents.

Dressed in a borrowed uniform, and hastily shaven, Lieutenant Bainter was furnished with a fresh horse. Saluting the Captain who stood by, smiling broadly, he touched with spurs and galloped off. He skirted Winton and overtook a lone horseman who was waiting for him.

"Come on, Sheriff!" he called.

"Well I'll be gummed!" exclaimed the amazed lawman, as he prodded his mount and the two men set off with all speed for the Rocking R.

THERE was a light in the living room of the Rocking R ranchhouse, when Bainter entered. An anxious group was assembled —Webber, Hawkes, Evers, the rest of the Basin cowmen. Something was in the air tonight, these men realized. Why the doubled guard on the herd? What had Benson been hinting at? Why were they all here? Why was Aunt Martha blushing like a young girl at something Benson whispered in her ear?

The Sheriff's entrance cut speculation short. They turned to him inquisitively. A cavalry officer strode beside him. There was something familiar about that officer. Something—

"Men," said the Sheriff, "want yuh to meet an old friend of ours—Lieutenant Tobe Bainter."

Loud cries of surprise and astonishment broke from the group.

"Look here, Sheriff," demanded shriveled Ned Hawkes. "What's goin' on tonight? Doubled guards. A meetin'. Benson talkin' about Raven. Now yuh bringin' in an hombre everyone's got reason to hate, all fancied up in a uniform. Where's the joke?"

"No joke," said the lawman dryly. "Tell 'em, Tobe."

For ten minutes, Bainter spoke quickly, proded on by a driving sense of urgency. At the outset, the cowmen listened sullenly. Then consternation showed in their faces, anger, as the force of reason and logic and truth spoke through Bainter's voice. They looked for confirmation to the Sheriff and he nodded grimly. When Bainter had finished men sat back, stunned, at the revelation of treachery and deceit.

"Then it was Major Harris all the time!" cried Chris Evers, aghast. "Humbuggin' us, ruinin' us, gettin' us to believe it was you. Tobe, we shore done yuh a plumb wrong."

They crowded around him, shamefaced, but eager to shake his hand.

"Let's get the Major!" Webber shouted suddenly.

"Just a minute," called Bainter. "The Major will be taken care of. The Comanches

are raidin' the pool herd tonight!" Fear flooded their faces. "But they're goin' to run into a big surprise, huh?"

Grim smiles suddenly replaced fear as men went for their rifles.

"We'll drive the herd into the corral," declared Hawkes. "Then let's see them red-skinned killers get past our fire!"

Bainter turned to his aunt. She stood there proudly, her eyes showing how glad she was. He kissed her cheeks.

"Tobe," she said to him worriedly, "Jane went to the Box T for some dresses she left in the attic. Gone since evening. You don't think—"

Bainter paled. He tore out of the house, flung astride his horse and thundered off.

A pale moonlight lay congealed on the earth. As he passed the span of trees that sat just beyond the Box T, which suddenly loomed out of the night, he waved his hand in signal to a blurry figure in the shadows. Then he sailed into the ranch-yard.

A gun-heeled cowboy drifted up. "What yuh want, sojer?" His voice was flat.

"Got news for the Major," replied Bainter.

The cowboy hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Reckon it's all right," he said. "He's inside."

Bainter entered the house, stepped softly into the living room. Back turned to the door, Major Harris, black-frocked and gun-belted stood facing Jane Taylor. The Major had evidently been making a speech.

"—we'll be happy in Mexico together, my dear. Away from the Basin, and that juvenile Jim Bainter. Ah!" From a distance came the sound of gunfire. "Sounds like trouble for our friends over there." He shook his head. "Too bad."

Jane Taylor, face flushed, eyes blazing, confronted the Major.

"You are a detestable hypocrite!" she flung at him defiantly, her voice filled with loathing. "Not fit to crawl with the worms. Not worth one finger of Jim Bainter!"

Abruptly her face blanched, as she stared past Harris. Some intuition warning of danger must have reached him, for he whirled —and fell back.

"Bainter!"

"Yore game's up, Harris!" announced Bainter. A tight grin twisted his lips. His teeth flashed in the lamplight. "Them red-skin friends of yores are runnin' in to a surprise party, one all prepared for 'em. Wait!"

Harris, pale as a ghost, had made a downward motion, but stopped short.

"Yuh might like to know that Pancho's told the authorities everything."

"You can't get out of this!" rasped Harris. "My men surround the house. They'll kill you."

"Yuh're wrong, Major." Bainter laughed. "I brought a troop of yellow-legs with me."

SNARLING like a wolf at bay, Harris went for his gun. His body bent with the draw, his feet sliding together. That was how he stood when Bainter's bullet hit him.

The echo of the shot roared through the room, and was caught up outside by thundering hoofs and rattling rifle-fire.

The distinguished-looking Major Harris teetered on his heels, then straightened.

"Jim—Tobe!" cried Jane.

Major Web Harris' knees caved, and he faded down onto the floor, dead. He was already forgotten as Bainter took the slim, trembling girl in his arms.

* * * * *

The Napoleon six-pounder rent the air with thunderous din. Old Glory floated proudly over the entrance gate of Fort Burns.

In the hog ranch down the trail, Frank Wurt wondered what the devil had got into them up there—shooting that blasted thing off in the middle of the day.

On the gaily bedecked parade grounds, Colonel Chester, florid-faced, beaming, was delivering an oration in front of a trim line of foot troops and, beyond them, a glossy line of yellow-legs.

Beside the Colonel on his left, stood Lieutenant Tobe Bainter and his bride, smiling at each other. On the Colonel's right, stood Hardtack Johnson, resplendent in a new uniform.

"This day," the Colonel was saying, "we have welcomed a new couple, who have just entered into the bonds of holy matrimony."

"Sounds like the *padre*, honey," whispered Bainter to Jane. She laughed back at him, dimpling, eyes glowing.

"In view of this occasion," the Colonel continued, "and in appreciation of the meritorious action of Lieutenant Bainter and his orderly, Hardtack Johnson, in breaking up the Comanchero trade, I am handing the Lieutenant this medal, and granting him a month's furlough!"

●

Next Issue's Novel: POWDER RIVER PRESCOTT, by Lee Owen

Carlos Lopez screamed as the keen blade struck

ZORRO SAVES A HERD

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Behind the Thundering Stampede Rides Zorro—His Toledo Blade a Match for the Pistol Hidden in the Sash of Carlos Lopez!

ROLLING up the tree-bordered driveway which led to the great adobe casa on the rancho of Don Manuel Sandoval, the ornate carriage was an imposing sight.

Imported from Spain by way of Mexico, the vehicle was truly a conveyance for a proud "hidalgo." Not in all Alta California was there another. It was drawn by a splendid pair of blacks with flowing manes and tails. Everyone in that part of the country knew the carriage was the property of old Don Alejandro Vega, and used by him for ceremonial visits and on feast days.

But the splendid conveyance was not being used by Don Alejandro now. He was taking his ease in his house near Reina de los Angeles. The carriage was being used by Don Diego, his only son.

Don Diego was rather resplendent himself. Attired in garments of brocaded satin, ruffled white silk shirt, boots of the finest leather, and a sash which contained all the hues of the rainbow, Don Diego reclined on

the silken cushions in the rear seat of the carriage. He covered his mouth and nostrils with a scented handkerchief to keep out the fine dust.

The native coachman driving the blacks was glad the carriage was nearing its destination. For his ears rang with Don Diego's complaints. When the coachman brought the horses to a stop in front of the Sandoval home, a footman sprang down to spread a length of crimson carpet on the ground and help Don Diego out.

A Sandoval servant witnessed the arrival and hurried to inform his master.

Don Diego strolled languidly to the front door. When it was not opened immediately at his approach, he turned toward the patio.

Gray-haired Don Manuel Sandoval was standing beside the fountain in the patio, stiff and stern, his eyes flashing, his hands clenched at his sides. Before Don Manuel stood a man whom Don Diego knew to be Carlos Lopez. Lopez held some sort of office under the Governor, and was reputed to be an unscrupulous rogue, as were most of the Governor's appointees at that time.

Don Diego overheard their conversation.

"But this is nothing less than robbery, senor," Don Manuel Sandoval was saying to Lopez. "In whatever guise it is presented, it still remains plain robbery."

"You defy the orders of your superiors, Don Manuel?" Carlos Lopez asked.

"My superiors?" A quality of amusement was in Don Manuel's voice as he spoke. "We have not been talking of my superiors, senor. We have been speaking of the Governor and those who serve him, men such as yourself."

"Your rash words shall be reported to the proper authorities," Lopez declared. "There are certain penalties for treason, Don Manuel."

"No doubt," Don Manuel said, "you are ignorant of history, not being an educated man. From the earliest times, senor, there have been periods when oppressors gathered power, and for a time made life miserable for honest men. They despoiled, robbed, slew. But never once, senor—and mark this well—never once did the oppressors last for long. With the loot they gathered, they also gathered the wrath of those they wronged, until it became a seething sea and engulfed them."

"I am not here, Don Manuel, to listen to any high-sounding words," Lopez broke in. "I came merely to state the case. You did not pay the special taxes which were assessed against your name. You even protested. So I was sent with my men to take over the herd. The animals will be driven to San Fernando and slaughtered. The value of the hides will be credited to your account. There will be little credit, however, since expenses of the operation must be deducted."

"In plain words," Don Manuel remarked, "you would steal my herd, kill the animals for their hides. Whatever the hides bring in the market will only offset the expenses. Despite the loss of my herd, I will still owe the original, exorbitant tax. Is that correct?"

"I do not make the laws, Don Manuel," Lopez said. "I merely obey orders."

"My vaqueros have just finished gathering the herd," Don Manuel said. "Now you come with your ruffians to seize it after the work is done."

"That is wisdom," Lopez said, smiling.

"It might honestly be called by some other name," Don Manuel hinted.

"I have stated the case," Lopez said. "We will camp for the night at the mouth of the canyon, and drive the herd away at dawn. I desire to inform you that the men I have with me are lusty fellows and well-armed. If your vaqueros make an attack, they will be dealt with harshly."

AT THIS moment, Don Diego Vega disclosed his presence. He strolled into the patio, brushing his scented handkerchief across his nostrils.

"Good afternoon, Don Manuel," he said. "I have done myself the honor to drive through the heat and dust to extend my father's compliments and my own to you and your charming daughter, Inez."

"Ah, Don Diego! A Vega is always thrice welcome at my house," Don Manuel replied.

"There seems to be a stench in your patio, Don Manuel," Don Diego observed. "It overpowers the fragrance of the roses and other blooms. It puzzled me at first, but now I have the answer to it. I am standing to windward of the creature beside you, and the stench comes from that direction."

"Don Diego Vega, I shall remember that remark," Carlos Lopez said angrily.

"As long as you do, senor, you will also remember that you cast a stench," Don Diego countered.

Lopez' face colored with wrath. He walked swiftly to the garden exit, where he stopped.

"Don Manuel Sandoval, I have told you what I came to say," Lopez called back. "I

shall report your words, and those of your visitor, Don Diego."

"If you make the report as strong as your stench, senor, it may travel even as far as the ears of the Governor in Monterey," Don Diego said. "Kindly do not annoy my friend, Don Manuel, any further."

"You speak in a loud voice for a cockerel without any spurs," Lopez replied. "Your lack of spirit and indolence are the jest of the country. If hidalgo blood flows in your veins, I am thankful it does not run in mine."

"No doubt your veins are charged with swill for swine," Don Diego observed. "Perhaps we shall learn some day regarding the truth of that. It is being said in Reina de los Angeles that Senor Zorro is riding the highway again. It appears to be his particular task to attend to rogues like you. When his blade lets blood out of your body, we shall see the color of it."

Carlos Lopez' eyes widened and his lower jaw sagged at the words. He turned and hurried to where his horse was waiting.

Don Diego turned to Don Manuel, who sought a bench beside a gurgling fountain. But, before Don Diego could speak, a vision of loveliness floated from the house and across the flagstones of the patio. Senorita Inez Sandoval stopped beside her father, her head held high and her eyes flashing as she accepted Don Diego's courteous bow.

"I heard everything," she said. "You, Diego, are good at turning a phrase, but that does not cast aside the disaster that is coming to our house."

"Disaster?" Don Diego questioned.

"They will steal our herd," Inez told him. "And the unjust tax will still remain against us. So they will come and steal something else, perhaps the furnishings of the house and our few jewels."

Don Manuel gestured for his daughter to be silent.

"Don Diego, pardon my poor hospitality," he implored. "My servants shall care for your horses and carriage at once, and furnish your coachman and footman with quarters and food."

"I asked my body-servant, Bernardo, to follow me on his mule," Don Diego said, "for I desire to remain the night with you. Bernardo will care for me personally."

The senorita sat beside her father. Don Diego took a bench on the opposite side of the fountain. A servant appeared with wineskin and goblets.

Don Manuel saluted Don Diego, and they drank. Senorita Inez touched her pretty curved lips to the edge of her goblet, her wide eyes watching Don Diego.

FOP or not, this man was the scion of the Vegas, a family of both wealth and power. Like many another senorita, Inez Sandoval wondered whether she could not make a proper man of him, if given the chance to do so as his wife. Perhaps this visit might mean something, she thought. It was well known that Don Diego detested riding around the country. He did not make meaningless or unnecessary journeys.

"Exactly what is the situation, amigo, concerning your herd?" Don Diego asked Don Manuel.

"My vaqueros have just completed the roundup, Diego. These tax-gathering scoundrels waited until the work was done before they appeared. In the morning they will drive the herd away. You heard Lopez."

"Where is the herd now?"

"In the box canyon two miles south of here. The canyon has a narrow mouth. Lopez and his rogues are camped just inside it. They drove my vaqueros away. Juan Castro, my chief vaquero, reported that my men are willing, but they cannot fight Lopez' men with any hope of victory. The scoundrels are heavily armed. I cannot ask my vaqueros to go to certain death."

"Certainly not," Don Diego agreed. "With your kind permission, amigo, we will talk of things less disturbing. To hear of troubles always fatigues me."

"You are indeed fortunate, Don Diego, that your family has no troubles of its own," Inez told him, a tinge of rebuke in her voice. "But your father is so strong in position that even the Governor dares not affront him. Others are helpless in the face of oppression."

She sprang to her feet in anger.

Don Diego rose quickly, bowing.

"I heard you speak of Senor Zorro," Inez continued defiantly. "He is riding again, righting wrongs and punishing oppressors. I wish he would ride this way to do his work! What a man he is!"

"He may be some peon rogue," Don Diego observed.

"Whatever his blood, he is a man," Inez said.

She tossed up her head and turned away.

Don Diego was escorted to a guest chamber in the great casa. Within a short time, his personal servant, the giant peon, Ber-

nardo, arrived on his mule. Bernardo knew many secrets concerning Don Diego Vega, but never would he disclose them. Bernardo had been born dumb. He could not write.

"Everything is in readiness, Bernardo?" Diego asked in a low tone when they met in the guest chamber.

Bernardo grinned, bobbing his head in assent.

"Zorro rides tonight," Diego went on. "It is a matter of attending to some rogues and saving a herd for a friend. Do you know Juan Castro, the chief vaquero here?"

Bernardo nodded.

"Roam around and observe several things," Diego ordered. "Find where Juan Castro has his hut. Zorro may wish to speak to him after nightfall. But first help me to dress for the evening meal."

At the repast in the Sandoval dining hall, Don Diego was a languid gentleman. He glanced at Senorita Inez a few times, but she could not convince herself that his glances were ardent. She sang for him after the meal, then retired with her duenna. Diego talked to Don Manuel for a time, yawning repeatedly.

"No doubt you are fatigued from your journey, Diego, and desire to seek your couch," Don Manuel said. "I shall retire, too, for I would be up before dawn to see what happens to my herd."

Don Manuel went with Diego to the door of the guest chamber to take leave of him ceremoniously. When Don Manuel was gone, Diego closed and barred the door. Bernardo was waiting.

"You have made all plans?" Diego asked him.

Bernardo bobbed his head. The peon's dilated nostrils and deep breathing were the only signs of excitement he revealed. He waited, standing back against the wall, while Diego removed his colored sash, so it would not delay him when the time came for him to change clothes.

From his traveling case, Diego took a pistol, powder and balls. Making sure the weapon was loaded properly, he thrust it into the belt of his trousers. He placed powder flask, balls and wads in a pocket of his coat.

"You know where Juan Castro is to be found?" he asked Bernardo.

Bernardo nodded that he did.

"No doubt you have my black horse ready, and the attire of Zorro so I may change into it quickly, and Zorro's sword. Is it so?"

Bernardo nodded assent.

"We will wait until the house is quiet," Diego told him.

A few minutes later, Bernardo extinguished the burning tapers in the candelabra. Diego went to a window which opened on the patio, and looked into the moon-drenched night.

"You will go with me until I have contacted Juan Castro," Diego said. "Then you will follow on your mule, as usual. Let us slip out now."

THEY left the room, closing the door carefully. They kept to the shadows as they went across the patio to the rear of the big house. Bernardo led the way beneath huge trees to where dense brush grew beside a stone wall. In the thicket the black horse of Zorro was waiting.

Diego changed his clothing swiftly, tucked the pistol into his belt, buckled on his blade. He got into the saddle and gathered up the reins.

"Where is your mule?" he asked Bernardo.

Bernardo pointed back into the brush. Beyond, a fire was burning by the group of huts where Don Manuel's vaqueros lived. Men were scattered around the flames, talking of their day's work and wondering about their herd in the distant canyon.

"Can you show me from here where Juan Castro lives?" Don Diego asked Bernardo.

The mute pointed directly at the vaquero fire, then waved his hand to the left and held up two fingers.

"The second hut on this side of the fire?"

Bernardo nodded agreement.

"Good!" Diego said. "Stay out of sight, but follow on your mule."

He urged the big black horse out of the brush, touched lightly with his spurs, and galloped toward the fire around which Don Manuel's vaqueros were sprawled, busy with food and drink. Some of the men sprang to their feet as the rider approached.

Zorro stopped within the circle of light cast by the flames and the vaqueros saw the big black horse, the man in the saddle, his attire all black, a mask over his face. They saw the blade at his side and the butt of the pistol thrust into his belt.

"I am Zorro!" the rider announced. "I have come to help you. Do not make any noise. Send Juan Castro to me immediately."

Castro, Don Manuel's chief vaquero, came hurrying to the fire.

"You are Zorro?" Castro nervously asked.

"I am. I have come to right matters for Don Manuel Sandoval, but you men must help me."

"We are yours to command, senor," Castro replied, his eyes gleaming.

"Your men do not have to fight and run the risk of death or injury," Zorro said. "Nevertheless, we will save the herd. Attend me!"

As they gathered around, Zorro spoke in low tones.

"Castro, send five or six of your men out beyond the mouth of the canyon where that dog of a Lopez holds your herd. You and the others will ride with me. We shall go to the head of the canyon and climb down into the defile on our horses. Suddenly, we will stampede the herd. The cattle will rush wildly down the canyon and over the camp of Lopez' scoundrels. When the stampede comes from the mouth of the canyon, the vaqueros we have stationed there will keep the herd running. The cattle will take to the hills and scatter. They will be so wild that for weeks no man will approach them."

"Lopez, who would despoil Don Manuel, will know it is useless to try to round up the cattle and drive them away," Castro said, his white teeth showing in a grin.

"That is right, amigo. If there is no herd to be driven away, Lopez and his jackals must return empty-handed. You, Castro, will have the hard labor of a roundup later, but the herd will be saved. Perhaps something will happen soon to prevent the rogues from despoiling Don Manuel of his other property. When it is safe, the cattle can be gathered again. Until then, they will run wild in the hills."

The vaqueros ran to their ponies.

Zorro rode away from the fire and waited. When the horsemen were ready, the band started quietly, Castro riding on Zorro's left and showing the way.

The riders who were to take stations in front of the canyon's mouth left the others, disappearing into the night. With Zorro and Castro at their head, the remaining vaqueros rode on through the shadows toward the head of the canyon.

Slowly, they ascended a rough hillside, making their way around huge rocks and through dense patches of brush. Finally, they could see the box canyon below them. The moonlight revealed a slumbering herd packed densely along the dry bed of a creek.

The descent was perilous and slow, for Zorro did not want his band to be observed. But finally all were on the floor of the box canyon at its head. The herd was between them and the mouth of the canyon. A quarter of a mile inside this canyon, in its narrow part, Carlos Lopez and his men were camped about the embers of a fire.

"Have your torches ready," Zorro ordered.

Some of the vaqueros had brought along torches made of twisting dry vines together and dipping the ends in hot tallow. Once put alight, the vine wood would flame and burn for quite a time. One of the vaqueros dismounted, put his dead torch against a rock, and got flint and metal ready to strike a spark.

FAR out beyond the mouth of the canyon, now the other vaqueros began screeching.

Lopez' men around the fire were attracted by the howls. Their attention centered down the canyon where they feared an attack. They thought nothing of the head of the defile, where the true danger lay.

"Light the torch," Zorro ordered.

Sparks flew and caught. Castro and his vaqueros rode past the peon afoot to ignite their torches from the one he held.

"At it!" Zorro ordered.

The vaqueros scattered to right and left across the head of the canyon. As they rode, they waved the torches above their heads, shouting. They charged around the rocks and through the brush straight at the slumbering herd down the defile.

But the herd was slumbering no longer. Already nervous from the roundup and the unusual bedding ground, the cattle leaped to their feet. The animals saw the flaming torches coming toward them, heard the wild yells.

Within a space of seconds the herd broke into a stampede. Bellowing, the frightened cattle raced from those flaming torches, down the canyon, following the dry creek bed toward the canyon's mouth.

The camp Lopez and his men had made was in the path of the frenzied herd.

Guns blazed at the camp. Men screamed in terror as they tried to get their horses, saddle them and mount. But they did not have time for that. The horses, terrified by the noise, charged out of the canyon's mouth.

The frenzied herd thundered on. Behind the stampede, the vaqueros still yelled and waved their flaming torches. The dry brush caught and burst into a sea of flame, which

the night wind blew down the defile.

Like an avalanche, the herd flowed over the spot where the Lopez men were camped. The mouth of the canyon was a bottleneck. There the herd swelled between the cliffs as the animals pushed one another higher and higher in the brush. Lopez' men found they could not escape the crushing hooves.

As the cattle streamed out the canyon's narrow mouth, the vaqueros waiting there rode screeching and waving torches of their own. The cattle kept moving toward the hills. None would find refuge in the brush but all would scatter over the range. Only after weeks would the stock get over their fright and commence congregating in the fertile valleys where there was water. Then Don Manuel's men would find them easily and drive them back when the danger of seizure was over.

While most of Zorro's band rode out the canyon's mouth behind the cattle, Juan Castro and a few men remained near Zorro.

"You did it, senor," Castro said. "Carlos Lopez and his rogues will not drive Don Manuel's herd away in the morning to be slaughtered. If I knew your identity, señor, I could thank you properly."

"My identity is to remain a secret, Castro," Zorro replied. "You will kindly tell Don Manuel Sandoval, when you return, that I am glad to have been of service to him. Do not follow me when I leave you, and see that none of your men do."

"It shall be as you wish, senor."

Zorro reined in abruptly. He pointed ahead. The herd had passed. The scattered embers of Lopez' campfire glowed in the night. Two men could be seen fleeing from a narrow ledge above the camp.

"Two horses are by those rocks," Zorro pointed out. "Those rogues are trying to get to them."

He spurred his big black. Castro and his two men followed. The fugitives heard them coming. One ran into the brush on the hillside.

"Catch him!" Zorro shouted to Castro. "I'll attend to this other."

Castro and his two vaqueros began pursuit of the man in the brush. Zorro rode on toward the other, who whirled.

A gun blazed and a slug sang past Zorro's head. The man ahead could not fire again without reloading. Zorro doubted if the culprit had a second pistol in his belt.

Some of the campfire embers caught on dry grass and brush. In the light of the spreading flames, Zorro saw that the man in front of him was Carlos Lopez.

BY THE same light of the burning grass, Lopez discovered the masked horsemen approaching. The sight seemed to sting him to activity. He turned and started running, but Zorro rode like a whirlwind and turned him back.

"Stand, Lopez!" Zorro shouted in a stern voice which certainly did not resemble the usual tones of Don Diego Vega.

Lopez halted in terror. In the light of the grass fire, his face was ghastly.

"Who are you?" Lopez cried. "Who were those men with you? I am the Governor's representative."

"A poor thing of which to boast," Zorro said. "I am known as Zorro."

"You? Did Don Manuel Sandoval engage you to do this thing?"

"Don Manuel knows nothing of it," Zorro said. "I seek to punish rogues wherever I find them. I found some here."

"They are still here. Look at them!" Lopez cried, almost in hysterics, pointing to Castro's vaqueros. "There they are. Only two of us lived through the stampede. It was your doing."

"Let us say it was the cattle's doing," Zorro replied. "It is fitting that your rogues die beneath the hooves of the animals they would have stolen and slaughtered. The men with me have attended to your compatriot. They will now ride on. You will be unable to identify any of them. You can report nothing, senor, except that the cattle stampeded and ran over your camp."

"I can report that Zorro did this."

"I will make it possible, senor, for men to believe that statement," Zorro replied, whipping his blade from its scabbard.

"You have made a bad error, Senor Zorro," Lopez screeched. "You have made it possible for me to earn a rich reward. This is your end."

As he spoke, Lopez brought out a second pistol which he had hidden beneath his jacket. Zorro raked his spurs as the weapon barked and flamed. The big black horse swerved aside, and the bullet almost burned Zorro's neck.

"You failed in that, senor," Zorro said. "And now—"

"Do not slay me!" Lopez cried. He knelt quickly beside a boulder, holding up his arms imploringly, a great fear mirrored in his face.

"If I slew you there would be none to tell your story," Zorro told him. "You must give your superiors proof."

Zorro's blade darted out. The light from the fire played along the Toledo steel like dancing flame. Carlos Lopez screamed as the keen blade struck. He toppled forward, his hands going to his face.

"Get up, miserable coward," Zorro ordered. "You still have your life. And until the day of your death, senor, you will have a scar on your forehead, one that forms the letter Z."

Zorro touched his black horse with spurs, galloped through the mouth of the canyon, and turned aside to race through the moonlight night, leaving the canyon behind him, with the dead on the ground where the campfire had been.

As the vaqueros were scattering the herd in the far distance, Zorro raced back toward the Sandoval casa. At a certain spot, he stopped his tired horse, and threw a strange call through the night.

Then Zorro rode on, watching the shadows at either side of the trail. Presently, he saw one moving toward him. It was Bernardo on his mule.

They were cautious as they neared the rancho. Lights were burning in the big house. Everybody had been aroused.

In the brush, Zorro dismounted, changed his attire quickly, and left the black horse for Bernardo to attend.

Then, Don Diego Vega darted through the shadows, avoiding streaks of moonlight. He made his way to a corner of the house and finally into the patio.

He heard somebody shouting as he reached the patio, and heard Don Manuel Sandoval reply. As Don Diego opened a door and slipped into the dark guest chamber, he could hear Castro's triumphant voice tell Don Manuel that Senor Zorro had appeared and led the vaqueros.

A very few minutes later, Don Diego Vega, his hair rumpled, his eyes seemingly half glazed with sleep, yawning, came from the guest chamber to cross the patio and go to the side of the house. Don Manuel was there with Castro and some of the house servants.

As Don Diego came into view, Senorita Inez and her duenna appeared, alive with excitement.

"What is all this tumult?" Don Diego asked Don Manuel, yawning again. "People shouting, the brush afire in the distance, horses being ridden around. Have the natives started another uprising?"

"Zorro has been here, amigo," Don Manuel told him. "He worked a trick and stampeded the herd. The cattle are running wild in the hills."

"I am happy for you, but spare me the recital," Don Diego begged. "Tales of violence always upset me. Even my body-servant, Bernardo, has skipped off somewhere, and is not here to bathe my forehead with perfumed water."

●

Another Swashbuckling Adventure

ZORRO RUNS THE GAUNTLET

Coming Next Issue

●

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

Sheriff Horn had killed Stevens' horse

Smokeless Powder

By ALAN M. EMLEY

Trapped by two armed bandits, old Sheriff Horn proves that he still has a trick or two up his sleeve!

OVER the door of a brownstone building was a dim sign of Sheriff James Henry Horn. Once it had been gay with new paint, but that had been more than thirty years ago.

Jim Horn had grown old and gray as sheriff of a harsh, desert county that was as large as a New England state. He seemed almost as weatherbeaten as the sign above his door, for both had been dried and burned in the summer sun and scarred and battered by wind-driven sand.

The stone building was a combination office, living quarters, kitchen and jail. The rooms were scrupulously clean, yet with the disorder and untidiness that comes from the absence of a woman's touch.

The two small cells had not been used many times since Jim Horn took over the maintenance of law and order in the county. The out-

laws who wandered into that desert wasteland were hard men who died with their boots on, rather than surrender to the hangman or a long term of imprisonment.

One of the cell doors was closed and locked now. Behind it leered the lean, cadaverous face of "Slim" Stevens. He was a slow-speaking, slow-moving man of mystery, for, behind an appearance of lethargy, he was as deadly as a rattlesnake.

Not only was he grinning through the bars, but his voice was that of a mischievous boy as he taunted the old man.

"Before yuh get through with this, yuh're goin' to get that handlebar mustache of yourn pulled, Sheriff. Yuh got nothin' on me. Yuh can't keep on holdin' a man in jail just because yuh got a mean disposition."

The sheriff did not answer.

Stevens' jeers were not idle ones, for there was no legal ground for holding him. His offense could not be considered serious. While crossing the border from Mexico in the moonlight, he had failed to stop when the sheriff called to him. A long chase had followed, during which shots were exchanged. Stevens' horse was now feeding the buzzards.

With furrowed brow Sheriff Jim Horn was sitting at his old roll-top desk as he examined the few things he had taken from Slim after a thorough search. There was nothing suspicious. A Colt .45, that was empty when the sheriff shot the horse from under him, a shoulder belt bristling with cartridges, a can of damp tobacco, cigarette papers, a wallet with a few coins. That was all.

Yet Horn had thought Stevens' moonlight jaunt peculiar enough to put him behind bars on suspicion. Someone was running dope across the Border—morphine, opium, cocaine, marijuana. Concerning this state of affairs, a pointed, sarcastic editorial, clipped from a newspaper, lay upon the sheriff's desk.

IN a plant far to the north, war workers were being offered dope, and a few of them, tired and nerve-wracked, were seeking relief from the pressure of their nerve-wracking labors. A crazed woman had wrecked a machine. A man, frothing at the mouth, had knifed a foreman and escaped into the mountains. The morale of the workers was low. A slowing of production, a growing distrust and ill-feeling between the employees of the plant. It was a vicious type of sabotage.

The traffic must be stopped at its source, the editorial had said, and the editor evidently believed the source was the seventy-odd miles of boundary that Jim Horn and one ancient deputy were supposed to patrol night and day. Two capable former deputies, young men full of energy and fight, were now Marines on active duty in the South Pacific.

Night after night Jim Horn had ridden that Border so weary that he was in danger of falling from the saddle. All he had caught was Slim Stevens of ill repute. Apparently Slim was not carrying dope, although the sheriff felt the man was capable of doing so if he had a fair chance and the money to buy the drugs in Mexico.

Again came Stevens' gibing voice.

"Yuh get paid for feedin' yore prisoners, don't yuh, Sheriff?" he said. "Suppose yuh wrassle me some grub. I want ham and eggs. Or is lettin' prisoners starve and puttin' the money in yore pocket, a part of yore graft?"

Horn arose wearily. Again Slim Stevens was right. A prisoner, no matter what his crime might be, was entitled to be fed. The sheriff was paid twenty-two cents a meal, and most of the time he prepared and served it himself.

His eyes and his back ached as he went into the kitchen. For three days and nights he had been almost constantly in the saddle, and he had eaten nothing since the previous day.

"Yuh goin' to let me starve, Sheriff?" called Stevens. "I'm shore one hungry hombre, believe me."

"I'm sorry, Slim," the sheriff answered. "I sort of forgot that neither of us had eaten for a long time. I'll rustle something, but it'll be bacon instead of ham. I got plenty of eggs, bread and coffee. If I'd known yuh was comin' I'd have had ice cream and pie, and I'd tie a nice napkin around yore neck."

He lighted a burner on the gasoline stove. Taking a huge coffee pot from a shelf, he shook it and looked inside. It was half-full with a muddy, brown liquid. He added a spoonful of new coffee and a cup of water, and set the pot over the flame. Water and more coffee was the sheriff's infallible recipe. Three or four times a year he dumped out the stale grounds and started again.

He took a slab of bacon from a cupboard and cut several thick slices. Then he returned to the office to wait for the coffee to boil.

He was cruelly tired with long vigil and hard riding. He sank into the swivel chair and stared moodily at the objects he had taken from Stevens. Dope! Where could Slim conceal it, if he actually was bringing it across the Border? He had heard of many clever hiding places—the horn of a saddle, the handle of a revolver, the rim of a hat, the lining of coat and vest.

Suddenly his eyes lost all sleepiness, and focused on Slim's cartridge belt. He took out one of the cartridges and examined it. It was new and bright. With a clasp knife the sheriff dug out the bullet which fell to the floor.

On a piece of paper he dumped a small, yellow pile of granules. It was smokeless powder, he believed. Or was it?

He carried it to the kitchen, poured it on the iron stove and held a lighted match close. There was a puff as the powder ignited, and a wisp of yellow, acrid smoke curled upward. Yes, it was the genuine McCoy. His hunch had been wrong.

The coffee was not yet boiling, and he re-

turned to his desk. Idly he slipped another cartridge from the belt and pried out the lead slug. Dumping the contents to a paper, he started and then stared with keen eyes. There was nearly a thimblefull of a white, crystalline powder, and it was entirely unlike the contents of the other cartridge.

Was it morphine? He examined it closely.

He didn't know much about narcotics, but if the pile before him really was dope, a small fortune could be concealed in the number of cartridges that were in Slim's belt. Yet not all of them contained powder.

WOULD this burn like the other? He poured the little pile into his hand and went to the kitchen.

"The jeering voice of Slim Stevens came from the cell. "Hurry up with that grub, Sheriff, or yuh'll have a dead hombre on yore hands," he shouted. "That'd be murder, and mebbe somebody would hang yuh by mistake."

"All right, Slim," the sheriff answered mildly. "I'll hurry. This coffee will boil in a minute."

He lifted the lid of the pot and looked inside.

There was a slight noise behind him, then a cold voice.

"Reach for the ceilin', and don't make any false moves."

Methodically the sheriff dropped the lid of the coffee pot and raised his hands. Slowly he turned.

A squat, pock-marked man was covering him with a gun. The sheriff had seen him once or twice, but didn't know his name.

"Unbuckle yore belt," the man ordered, "and do it slow. If yuh reach for that gun I'll plug yuh."

The sheriff fumbled with the buckle, and the belt with its holstered gun dropped to the floor.

"Kick it over this way."

The sheriff complied.

Slim Stevens' voice came from the cell room.

"Is that you, Barney?"

"Shore thing. Who'd you expect? Roosevelt? March in there, Sheriff, and unlock that cell door."

Grimly, without speaking, the sheriff stepped to the cell and turned the key in the lock. Slim came out grinning.

"Thanks, Old-timer," he said sarcastically. "That was real nice of yuh. What'll we do with him, Barney? He's a tough old buzzard, yuh know, and we got to watch him every minute."

"Lock him in the cell."

"Good idea, but first let him get that chow. I'm half-starved. I ain't no good at cookin', and neither are you."

"All right. Get goin', Sheriff, and don't make any false moves. I never miss, 'specially at two feet."

With a gun held at his back, Jim Horn took a frying pan from a hook, lighted another burner, and spread the strips of bacon in the bottom of the pan.

He had not eaten for many hours, but the sizzling bacon held no appeal for him now. He had become sick with the feeling of failure. Dope-running across the Border! War workers corrupted. Work slowed up. And Bill Stanton and Bud Rockwell were fighting the Japs in the Solomons, maybe short of ammunition.

He turned the sizzling bacon with a fork, and his hand was trembling. He was bitterly angry with his own helplessness. He should have resigned long ago, he thought, and given up his place to a better man. Trapped in his own house, his prisoner liberated, he was cooking for two outlaws with a gun at his back. He might as well be an old woman.

Slim and Barney were talking in low tones.

"How'd yuh know I was here?" Slim asked.

"We didn't know till we got in town, and then we learned about it from a cowhand. I come here after yuh, while the boys was holdin' up the bank. Where's the stuff?"

"In here."

Slim Stevens strode into the office, and returned with his possessions. He looked at his gun and buckled on his huge shoulder belt.

"Yuh say the boys is stickin' up the bank?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's a cinch. The back door was unlocked. I went in to change a twenty-dollar bill. I talked and laughed loud while Lem and Harry slipped through the back door and holed up in a closet. They always close the bank at four o'clock. They lock the front door and pull down the shades so no one can see inside. Tonight they'll wish they'd left 'em up, 'cause the boys will come out and take charge. They'll lock the cashier and that woman bookkeeper in the vault, and go out the back door with all that cash. We'll have hours for a getaway. The next time we cross the Border we'll have the *dinero* to buy enough dope to make a real cleanin'."

The sheriff's hand was still trembling as he forked the bacon into a plate, poured out most of the grease, and broke eggs into the pan. The men's contempt for him was shown in their conversation. They heeded him no more than if he had not been present.

SLOWLY, deliberately, he cut bread, put dishes on the table, poured hot coffee into two cups, and served the meal.

"All right, men," he said grimly. "That's all I've got."

"Yuh can set down and eat," said Slim. "I know yuh ain't had nothin' since I have. Or mebbe yuh don't feel much like takin' on some chow as long as things ain't goin' yore way."

The sheriff shook his head, ignoring Stevens' malevolent grin.

"Yuh're right, Slim," Horn said in a low, husky voice. "I don't feel like eatin'."

"Mebbe yuh feel like sleepin'," jeered Barney. "Into the cell with yuh, and don't start makin' any noise."

He took the keys and locked in the sheriff.

Then he grinned through the bars, showing long, yellow teeth, and left the room. The sheriff could hear the two pull up chairs and begin the simple meal he had prepared. He sighed wearily and sat down on the cot with his face in his hands. It was so still he could hear the ticking of the big clock that stood against the office wall.

IN THE meantime, over at the bank, sinister events were occurring. There were still two customers there when the cashier, Henry, Allison, pulled down the shades and locked the door.

One of them, Cal Williams, had just sold a bunch of steers, and was making a huge deposit.

"If the price of cattle keeps up, you'll make a killing, Cal," Allison remarked as he filled in the deposit ticket.

"Yeah, but I'm sellin' off everything but yearlin's and cows. It'll take two years before I'm back in the cattle business, and I won't have a cent till then. But it doesn't matter. Uncle Sam needs all the beef he can get. Besides, every danged cowpoke I had on the place, who wasn't too old or too crippled, is in the Army."

The men finished their business, and Allison let them out the front door.

A half-gasp, half-scream came from Miss Johnson who was posting books. Allison turned. Then he stood transfixed, as he found he was staring squarely into the black, round muzzle of a .45 held in a steady hand. The owner of gun and hand was a tall fellow with a dotted blue neckerchief covering his face to the eyes.

"Reach, brother," he said, "or yuh'll be twangin' a harp on the golden streets."

"Or shovelin' coal down below," added another man who was aiming a gun at Miss Johnson.

Helplessly the cashier raised his hands. Often had he planned what he would do in case of a hold-up. He had an automatic pistol in an open drawer in the cashier's cage. On the floor was an electric button connected with a bell in the sheriff's office.

If he had been in his usual place, he could press that button with a foot and no one in the bank would be the wiser.

Now all his plans had gone to the buzzards. The two bandits had planned their entrance well.

"Line up, here, you two," the tall man ordered.

"You can't get away with this," Allison told him. "Jim Horn is sheriff of this county, and you ought to know what that means. He'll run you down in two hours."

"Don't figger on yore smart sheriff," the man taunted. "We got two good fellers takin' care of him. He's probably locked in his own jail by now."

With backs against the wall, Allison and Miss Johnson looked on helplessly while the tall bandit gathered up the money in the cage, and stuffed it into canvas bags. His haul was a big one, for there had been heavy deposits that day.

Allison groaned as he realized that both vault and safe were open.

If he only had shut that safe, the time clock would keep it closed till nine o'clock the next morning.

The tall man started for the vault, a canvas bag in each hand.

A clear, cold voice cracked like a rifle shot.

"Put up yore hands, men. High!"

Framed in the doorway leading to the back room stood Sheriff Jim Horn, a gun in each hand.

The bandit guarding the employees whirled suddenly and fired from the hip.

HIS shot was drowned by a roar and a burst of flame.

He staggered, then slumped slowly to the floor where he lay groaning and clutching his stomach.

"I said reach high," again came the sheriff's cold voice. "But I'd just as soon yuh'd go for that gun. It saves time and a heap of expense."

The tall bandit dropped his sacks and raised his hands.

"Get his gun, Hank," said the sheriff. "Miss Johnson, yuh'd better go for a doctor. I don't think that hombre is dead, more's the pity."

The bookkeeper took two steps, then sighed and sank to the floor a foot from the groaning bandit.

"Heck," said Jim Horn. "Ain't that just like a woman? When the whole thing's over she faints dead away."

Allison had the bandit's gun, and they stood him against the wall.

Quickly the cashier revived Miss Johnson, and she ran for a doctor.

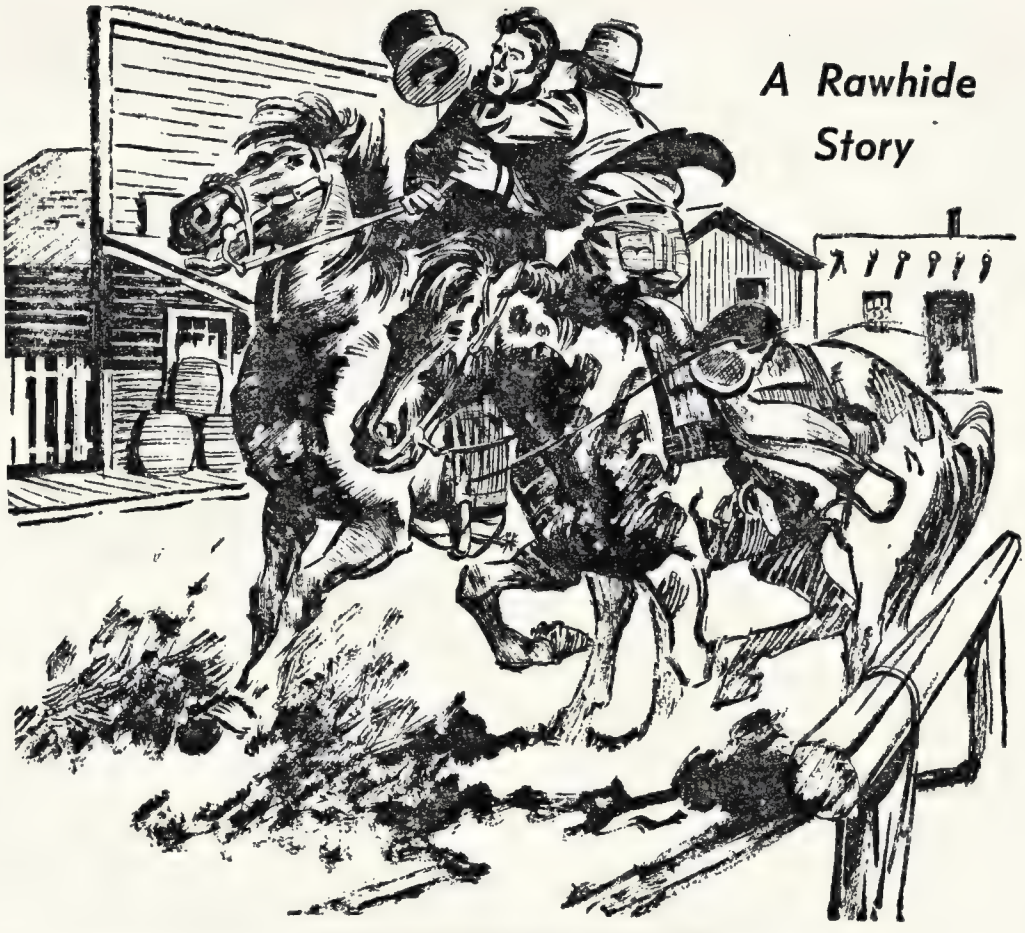
"How did you know we were being held up, Jim?" the banker asked. "They told me you were locked in a cell with two men on guard."

A faint smile crossed the sheriff's stern lips.

"Shore, I was locked in," he said, "but I always carry an extra key in the linin' of my vest. That ain't the first time I've been locked in my own jail."

"But the men on guard. How'd you get past 'em?"

"Well, yuh see, Hank, that gang not only tried to rob yore bank. They're dope runners, and I been after 'em a long time. I found some stuff I thought was morphine hid in a ca'tridge, but I wasn't sure, and I wanted to try it on something to see if it really was the dope I'd been lookin' for. Well, it was morphine, all right. When I came out of that cell both of them outlaws was sleepin' like twin babies in a crib. Yuh see, when that hombre jumped me with a gun, I had some of the stuff in my hand, and I dumped it into the coffee."



A Rawhide Story

Peg vaulted from the saddle, reached out for Harlan

ODD MAN'S TURN

By TOM PARSONS

While Peg Strickland Battles a Gigantic Rainmaking Swindle of Dr. Harlan, His Rival, Alita Bowen Springs a Surprise!

FOR thirty days a blanket of heat had wrapped Rawhide. Out on the range, the continued drought shrank the water supply and harried ranchers began to tally their losses in dead cattle. Every wheel that moved along Rawhide's street raised clouds of dust. Each day from the War Bonnets southward anxious eyes scanned a brazen sky dominated by a blazing sun.

Tempers frayed short and even Lem Adams lost his usual easy-going calm. Day by day he grew more irritable as the choking, smothering heat held. In the midst of this, two visitors came to Rawhide. They rode in together on the Yerba stage. "Peg" Strickland and Yancey Colver, the blacksmith, saw them descend from the coach, the man courteously helping the lady to the ground.

"That's her!" Peg whispered excitedly and nudged Colver in the ribs. "That's the gal what's visitin' Mrs. Garver, like she said.

Alita Bowen. Nice name, ain't it? And a sure pretty gal to go with the name."

Yancey Colver pulled his powerful bulk away from Peg Strickland's insistent elbow. He wiped the sweat from his face, ugly and broad, and carefully considered the girl. She wasn't tall, but she was slender and graceful for all that. A white, cool dress accented her lovely lines. Beneath the wide-brimmed straw hat a pair of deep violet eyes looked over the single street of the town. With full, well-shaped red lips she smiled at her traveling companion.

"You have been very kind, Dr. Harlan."

"Don't mention it, ma'am. It's been a pleasure," the man answered. He held her hand overly long until the girl flushed and gently disengaged it. "Since we're both to be at Mrs. Garver's, I'll be happy to escort you there."

Peg Strickland looked at Yancey Colver and then back at the stranger. He was tall and dressed in black. Despite the heat he still wore his long black coat and he held his stove pipe hat in his hand. The sun reflected from his sleeked black hair. His face was long, the eyes brown and pinched a little too close together. A pointed nose ended over wide, smiling, thin lips. Peg decided he didn't like this Doctor Harlan. Besides, Rawhide was well enough content with one sawbones, Doc Renford.

The stage driver held out two carpetbags and the stranger took them both. He smiled at Miss Bowen and the two trudged off down the street toward Mrs. Garver's boarding and rooming house.

PEG STRICKLAND watched them, his blue eyes clouded. His wide shoulders came back and he clenched his broad hands into fists. Muscles strained his shirt across the broad chest.

"Yancey, do yuh reckon a smooth slicker like that ought to associate with a lovely gal like Miss Alita?"

"He is, ain't he?" Yancey asked flatly. His eyes never left the two walking down the dusty street. "Does seem an all-fired shame."

"It is that." Peg swung around to face his friend. His blue eyes held a strange, far-away gleam. "Yancey, I reckon I aim to do something about it. I've decided that Miss Alita Bowen is goin' to be my gal."

Yancey Colver grunted and rubbed a calloused hand along his rocky jaw. His black eyes peered questioningly at Peg Strickland and his thick lips moved into a slow grin. He shifted the weight of his stocky body on powerful legs and then he chuckled aloud.

"Plumb anxious, ain't you, Peg? Might be the lady'd have a heap to say about that. Might be the new Doc would, too—and maybe some other gents."

Peg made a wide gesture of dismissal. "I can take care of any objections, I figure."

"Some anyhow," Yancey answered, looking over Peg's powerful frame and the thick arms corded with muscles. "I'd best be gettin' to work."

He turned and walked around the corner of the stage station, heading for his shop. Peg Strickland sighed deeply and walked slowly to the general store. By now Alita Bowen and Doc Harlan had reached Mrs. Garver's house and had turned in the walk. Peg had a brief glimpse of them as they disappeared inside the door. He sighed again and entered the store.

Lem Adams worked in the stock room in the back. He was checking his merchandise to make up an order for Peg to haul in from Pinto. The freight driver sank down on a box and spoke dreamily.

"Mrs. Garver's niece done come in. She sure is pretty." Lem grunted and continued counting cartons of canned goods. Peg pulled out paper and tobacco. "There was a new Doc come in with her. Regular dude, looked like. He won't get no place against Doc Renford."

Lem looked up, swiftly and with interest. His white hair was disarrayed and beads of sweat stood out on his high forehead. He was a big man with a lionlike head and piercing gray eyes, full lips shaped to command.

"New doc?" he asked.

"Doc Harlan, I heard Alita call him," Peg nodded.

"Fine! We been lookin' for him. I reckon he'd better meet Krannert and the other ranchers as soon as we can get 'em together.

"Hey!" Peg exclaimed and stood up. "Yuh ain't aimin' to get him started in Rawhide? Why, Doc Renford is going to marry yore daughter. Yuh wouldn't want him fighting another—"

"Harlan ain't no sawbones," Lem cut in. "He's a doctor of science. He's been workin' north of Pinto and was mighty successful, I hear. We sure need him in Rawhide. Doc Harlan's a rain-maker, Peg."

"Rain-maker! Yuh mean he brings storms?" Peg shook his head wonderingly.

"That's it, Peg. Doc Harlan is famous all over the West from what I hear. He's made rain where there ain't been none in two or

three years. Does it scientific, somehow. Peg, you ride out to Krannert's and tell him Harlan has come. I'll get the Doc and we'll have a meetin' here tonight."

Peg, still shaking his head in wonder, pulled himself from the box. Outside on the porch, he looked toward Mrs. Garver's long and searchingly. At last his lips pressed together and his eyes sparked.

"I don't believe it," he told himself flatly. "He ain't nothin' but a fake. Can't no man make rain unless the good Lord wants it to come."

He strode off, rounding the corner to the stable. Even after he saw Krannert's excitement at his news, Peg stuck stubbornly to his belief that no man could make rain. He glanced up at the sky, a blinding clear blue from the harsh peaks of the War Bonnets as far south as he could see. Not a cloud anywhere and the sun a blinding orb that dared any mere mortal to challenge its power.

"Someone's loco," Peg said again. "It ain't me."

HE RETURNED to Rawhide, reported to Lem Adams and then hurried to his own shack. He spent a long time fixing up for supper. He put on his best new blue levis and the checked shirt. An orange neckerchief set off the red of the cheeks. He slicked down his hair carefully and wished he didn't have so many freckles scattered across his broad nose and pleasant face. He shined his boots and then, satisfied at last, hurried to Mrs. Garver's.

He was all eagerness until he stepped inside the door, into the small hallway. He could see the boarders at the long table, already eating. Mrs. Garver met him and just behind her was Alita Bowen. She was even more lovely, this close, than Peg had believed. Her auburn hair came about to Peg's shoulders. Her smile was slow, the eyes deep. Peg flushed and wished his hands weren't so long and his face such a flaming red. Mrs. Garver, who mothered every man in Rawhide like a hen does a brood of chicks, smiled knowingly at Peg.

"Now you get right in to that table. Land sakes, the food will be cold and gone before you get your breath. Alita will be here for some time."

"Aunty!" the girl breathed and blushed. She smiled again at Peg and hurried to the kitchen.

Yancey Colver grinned at Peg from across the table as he passed him the meat platter. He signaled with his eyes toward the head of the table where Dr. Harlan sat. The scientist ate as voraciously as any of the rest but his close-set eyes followed Alita's every move as she kept the bowls of food replenished.

Harlan spoke in a rasping voice and frequently wore a self-satisfied smirk. After he had finished, he leaned back and lighted a cigar. He talked constantly about Dr. Harlan and the wonders he had achieved.

"Why this drought isn't anything to one I finished up in Utah! It hadn't rained there for a decade, they told me. Well, sir, I went to work and the sky poured water. They darned near had a flood until folks began to talk about moving to higher ground."

"How do yuh make rain?" Peg asked, an edge of truculence in his voice. Harlan's dark eyes glittered, then softened when he smiled at Alita as she moved past him. Harlan steepled his fingers, elbows on the table.

"Now that's a sort of scientific secret, but I can say this much. I use the principle of shock—explosive-shock. The details are secret, but by explosions I create vibrations in the air. This moves air masses so that the hot air over Rawhide is shifted, allowing rain clouds to come in."

"Where's the rain clouds to begin with?" Peg demanded. Harlan gave him a cold, hard glance.

"They might be anywhere, but I bring them here."

A silence fell around the table while the two men glared each other. The rest felt the instinctive antagonism of these two. Yancey cleared his throat and the tension broke. The men got up, Peg among them and they wandered out on the porch.

There, in the comparative cool of dusk, they rolled cigarettes and low talk circled about the strange Doctor Harlan. Peg Strickland kept a close eye on the door. He wanted to be the first to see Alita Bowen. Yancey stood at his side and Peg noticed that the blacksmith was all suavity and polish.

At that moment Alita appeared in the doorway, and Peg stepped forward instinctively, then pulled up short. Alita smiled at him and waited. Peg's fingers worked furiously at the brim of his hat.

"I—er, that is—I figured maybe yuh'd like to see Rawhide. I'd be mighty pleased to take yuh around."

"Now isn't that nice?" a rasping voice said and Harlan's head appeared over the girl's shoulder. He glared at Peg. "Miss Bowen has accepted my invitation, sir, for a stroll."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Strickland," Alita smiled

again. "But maybe another time?"

"Sure, sure!" Peg grasped at the implied promise. He stepped back and scowled murderously at Harlan as the two walked down the steps and started for the street. Peg jammed his hat on his head, swore under his breath.

"There's one feller I sure aim to take down a couple of pegs. He rides too high and handsome for just plain folk."

"He's a rain maker," Yancey Colver said dryly. He grinned lop-sidedly at Peg. "He's one of them scientist fellers. Heap smarter than gents like you and me. For instance, he sure walked off with Miss Alita."

"There's other times," Peg snapped and walked away from the porch.

PEG STRICKLAND went home and pulled off his good duds, changing back to comfortable work clothes. He lighted a cigarette and sank down on the step outside the door. In the darkness, his imagination pictured Alita Bowen's violet eyes and he could hear her soft voice again. He sighed, a sound pulled from deep in his chest.

"Doggone, if I ain't been hit hard," he whispered awesomely to the stars. Then he remembered Harlan and instantly he felt a stir of anger. He remembered the meeting at the general store would start in a short while, and Peg wanted to hear more of Harlan's powers. He snuffed out the cigarette and strode off to the store. The night was hot and the coal oil lamps in the big store room made it hotter. Every rancher around Rawhide was present, Peg saw, mopping sweat from their faces and speaking in low, worried tones. Doc Renford sat on a counter to one side and spoke in whispers to Mary, Lem's daughter.

Abruptly the front door opened and Dr. Harlan strode in. A path opened before him as he walked down the aisle. Lem Adams advanced to meet him. The big storekeeper held up his hands for silence.

"This here is Doc Harlan. Yuh all know what he's done in other parts of the country and there ain't no need to repeat it here. He can make it rain and Rawhide sure needs rain if we ain't all to be ruined. I'll let Doc Harlan do the talkin' from now on."

Harlan pulled down on his coat lapels and his fingers remained clenched as he spoke. His narrow eyes circled the worried, hot faces that looked hopefully at him. His thin lips broke into a smile.

"Friends, like Mr. Adams said, I can make rain. I've done it a hundred times in a hundred different parts of the country."

"Rawhide is sure hot right now," Krannert said. "It's take a heap of doin'."

"My friend, I'm the man to handle it." Harlan turned to the rancher. "By strictly scientific methods I can bring the clouds to Rawhide and I can make them open up and pour down life-giving moisture on the parched earth."

Peg had edged the length of the counter to Lem Adams' side. The big storekeeper watched Harlan with a pitiful concentration. If the drought ruined the ranchers, then Lem Adams' business at the store would be sorely hit—all Rawhide, for that matter, from Lem to the swamper in Sturgis' New Deck. Rawhide lived on the ranches. Harlan stepped back a bit and drew himself up.

"I have statements from all over the country, if you care to read them. They testify as to my ability. If you want rain in Rawhide, then I'm the agent to do the job for you."

"How much yuh charge?" Krannert asked. Harlan's eyes slid around the room and Peg could almost hear him counting the men. There was a slight pause.

"One thousand dollars. That includes all the costs of the equipment I require. Say there's twenty ranchers and business men among you, that's only fifty dollars each—a mere pittance, gentlemen, to bring back rain and prosperity and break the drought that holds Rawhide."

"That's a heap of dinero." Krannert scratched his head. "Well, you bring rain, and we'll pay for it." Harlan's lips curled in a superior smile and he shook his head.

"No, my friend, you produce the thousand and then I'll bring the rain. I have costs to meet, material to be hauled. My reputation for success is your guarantee."

He stood back, aloof and superior as a buzz of conversation arose. Lem Adams shrugged off Peg Strickland's restraining hand and stepped into a hot discussion with Krannert of the Rocking K and Bob Magee of the Rafter M, the two biggest ranches near Rawhide. Peg stared disgustedly at the arguing men and then at Harlan, who frowned at Peg and glanced away. Harlan was superior and amazedly cool-looking in the long black coat and white shirt. At last Lem Adams turned.

"Doc, we'll meet yore terms. Something has to be done, and mighty fast, or Rawhide ain't goin' to be here. The thousand dollars will be ready right after the meetin'. When can yuh start?"

Harlan smiled and rubbed his hands. His manner grew friendly and re-assuring.

"Right away, friends. Right away. I'll need a freight wagon to bring in material from Pinto. I could start in the morning, if the wagon is available."

"Yuh'll have it," Lem nodded. "Peg, yuh take orders from Doc here until he's through his work."

"Aw, Lem!" Peg protested.

THE store keeper had already turned away. Harlan smiled nastily. Peg's fists clenched.

"Be ready first thing in the morning," Harlan snapped. Peg choked down his anger and stalked out of the store. He worked for Lem Adams and the wagon and team he drove belonged to the storekeeper. But he didn't have to take Harlan's orders.

Peg hurried back to his shack and slumped down on the steps. He cursed long and monotonously, placing Harlan's exact status in the animal kingdom. Yancey Colver came lumbering along, stopped out in the street. He turned and came up, sitting beside Peg. For a moment the two men were silent.

"That Doc," Yancey Colver started slowly, "he talks big and she sure sounds good. But it don't make sense."

"It makes a thousand dollars' worth to Lem and the ranchers," Peg growled. Yancey whistled, a long, low sound. "I aim to show that fake up, Yancey."

"How?" Yancey asked reasonably.

"I dunno, yet. But he ain't comin' into Rawhide, stealin' a heap of dinero from folks I know, or walkin' off with the prettiest girl in these parts. I got to haul him to Pinto for some rain-makin' supplies and I reckon I'll get some sort of a line to dab a loop on."

"Might," Yancey agreed. He became quiet, staring off in the darkness. At last he slapped his knees and arose. "Yuh're right about Miss Alita. She sure is pretty. Buenos noches."

He walked off and Peg Strickland scowled after his squat figure until he disappeared in the darkness.

The trip to Pinto the next day was anything but pleasant. Doc Harlan was arrogant, inclined to snap orders in an irritating, superior tone. He climbed up on the high seat beside Peg who clucked to the horses. The wagon rolled down the Dog Leg Road headed for distant Pinto beyond the War Bonnets.

They passed Mrs. Garver's house and Alita Bowen was on the porch. Peg grinned and snapped his long whip in salute. Alita's smile was exciting. Harlan stood up and doffed his hat. The wagon lurched and he nearly toppled off the seat. Peg caught him and Doc sat down.

"Be more careful with your driving," he said. Peg's temper snapped. He glared at Harlan.

"Now look here. I'll drive these hosses my way. I'll get yore rain-makin' stuff but I don't have to take yore sass, savvy?"

He glared at Harlan whose pinched eyes held an ugly look. Finally Harlan shrugged and fished a cigar from his pocket. He lighted it, then studied Peg through the blue smoke. His thin lips curled.

"That girl's in your craw," he said at last. He chuckled. "But it isn't going to do you any good. I've got the inside track there and you haven't a chance. Don't know but I may decide to marry Alita. She needs someone like me."

They were on a grade leading into the War Bonnets. Nevertheless Peg pulled back on the reins and set the brake. He dropped the whip in the socket and turned to face his passenger.

"Now that's mighty durned white of you, ain't it? Yuh might marry the gal. She needs yuh!" His finger jabbed hard at the white shirt front and Harlan shrank back from the blazing eyes. "Listen, yuh snake, yuh got a double fight on yore hands. First off, I ain't never heard of a man losin' a gal until the knot is tied to someone else. That goes for Miss Alita, savvy?"

"You don't think you have a chance!" Harlan's grin disappeared swiftly when Peg's fist knotted. Slowly the freight driver regained control of himself but his voice was still choked.

"Second, I think this here rain-makin' is a smart swindle and nothing more. I aim to show yuh up. Now we know where we stand and I'm tired of hearin' yore voice. Let's get yonderly."

He picked up the reins and clucked to the team. The big freighter rolled on up the slope, topped the ridge and followed the winding road into the War Bonnets. Doc Harlan sputtered and glared at Peg. Twice he started to say something and Peg's threatening expression stopped him. At last he recovered his courage.

"I suppose I'll have to report this to Lem Adams," he said. Peg looked around, surprised, then burst into a loud guffaw.

"Now yuh just go right ahead. Lem always figures a man ought to be big enough

to settle his own fights. He'll tell yuh that."

Harlan subsided into silence. The drive to Pinto from then on was a strained, unpleasant affair. Neither man spoke and there was an angry tension between them. The heat bore down like a hot iron, particularly stifling in the first low mountain valleys. For a short time they had relief as the road climbed high into a pass.

BUT after that it seemed worse than before. They swiftly descended to the wide plain beyond and lined out for Pinto. By the time they had gone ten miles there wasn't a dry stitch of clothes on either man. Harlan finally took off his coat. He was sweat-soaked through and through.

It was with a sense of relief that Peg at last saw the first houses of Pinto, unsteady and dancing in the heat waves. He spoke an encouraging word to the team. They rolled into Pinto and Harlan directed Peg to the hotel.

He climbed down stiffly and glared up at the driver.

"I'll order the material tonight. You meet me here in the morning and we'll pick it up."

Peg nodded and bent down. "Doc, don't get no ideas of leavin' Pinto."

"What do you mean?"

"Yuh got one thousand dollars folks I know gave yuh. I still don't figure yuh can make rain. As soon as I put up the team, I'm stayin' in this hotel, too, just to keep an eye on yuh." Harlan drew himself up like a ramrod.

"You're accusing me of stealing!" he snarled in a rasping voice.

"Nope, not exactly. Not so long as the Pinto sheriff is just across the street. At least yuh'll give the boys a show for their dinero. I'll be around soon, Doc."

He drove off leaving the rain-maker standing in the street. Peg put the team up at the Pinto livery stable. He returned to the hotel, checked that Harlan had registered and was in his room. Peg waited in the little box lobby until the rain-maker came down. He followed Harlan out to the street and into a little cafe.

At the door, Harlan turned, showing his teeth like an angry dog.

"Get out of my sight! Quit trailing me!"

"Calm yore dander, Doc. Yuh still ain't made rain."

For a moment Peg thought Harlan would hit him. Peg's lips broke in a pleased grin. His eyes danced and he waited. Harlan breathed deeply, and slowly his fists opened. He turned on his heel and stalked to a counter stool. Peg felt keen disappointment.

The next morning Peg loaded a strange assortment of objects into the big wagon. Lem Adams' store merchandise had already been stowed compactly to the front. Doc Harlan's material finished up the load. There were one hundred kites, exactly like those that buttons flew in the spring. There was box on box of firecrackers. Peg looked sharply at Harlan as he started loading them, but the rain-maker said nothing.

Next came heavy round tubing. There were kegs of gunpowder and a box of dynamite, fuse and caps. There were balls of twine for the kites. It just didn't make sense and Peg said so.

"Your knowledge of meteorology is probably as good as your knowledge of women," Harlan snapped. Then he grinned and rubbed his hand. "Mister, I'm going to give you two bits of bad news before long. I'm making rain at Rawhide, and I'm getting Alita Bowen."

"If yuh make rain with this bunch of junk, I reckon yuh could get the gal," Peg retorted. "Let's head for Rawhide."

The trip back was uneventful, just as hot and just as much tension between the two men. Peg sighed with relief when they finally rolled out of the foothills and into Rawhide's main street. He pulled up before the store, believing his association with Harlan was over. It wasn't. After a brief conference with Lem, Peg had to get a riding horse for Harlan and saddle it. Then he had to freight the rain-maker's equipment out to Krannet's Rocking K.

By the time Harlan had decided upon the proper spot for his work, it was late in the afternoon. Peg swore angrily under his breath but unloaded the stuff, weighting it down under a tarp. He drove eagerly back into Rawhide. He still had time to get to Mrs. Garver's house in time for supper—and Alita.

There was more delay at the store, but Peg impatiently threw himself into the work. He finished in record time and hurried outside. He had just reached the street when a surrey drove by.

Peg looked up, saw Alita's lovely face, then the triumphant grin and mock salute that Doc Harlan gave him.

The surrey rolled on and Peg was beclouded by the heavy dust of the street. His face set in harsh angry lines and his lips tightened. But he held his temper and resisted a temptation to slam his hat into the dust and kick it.

DOC HARLAN had announced that he would make rain the next Sunday. Word spread swiftly over the range and arguments became heated in the New Deck and the general store. Some thought Harlan would be successful, others that he would fail and the thousand dollar fee go for nothing. On that score there were definite opinions, stated forcefully by Krannert.

"He makes rain or he gives back the dinero."

Peg listened and approved. He had his date with Alita at last, that very night. They went riding down the Squaw Creek road, skirting the chain of the mighty War Bonnets. There were a million stars, a soft and silver moon. Everything was perfect—except Peg Strickland's state of mind.

But during the ride he was struck dumb. He had so much to say and yet he was all choked up. He managed a few sentences, mostly flat remarks about the weather, the heat, the possibility of rain. Alita listened, demure and lovely, creating more of a panic in Peg's brain every minute. Finally Peg drove her back to Mrs. Garver's, still trying desperately to tell the girl how lovely she was, and the dreams he had begun to build if she would consent to place her future life in his keeping. It all stuck in his throat.

"It's been lovely, Peg," Alita said at the door and touched his arm. "You'll be at the box supper at the school Saturday night? Good. My box will have a pink ribbon."

She was gone and Peg grinned happily in the darkness. She wanted him to be with her Saturday night. He strode down the walk, whistling. His cheerfulness remained for the rest of the week. He could even look without rancor at the officious Doc Harlan as the rain-maker strode importantly around Rawhide. Yancey Colver noticed it.

"It's that Alita," the blacksmith said sagely, resting a moment at the anvil. "You and him is both workin' up a mad about her. Ain't no use."

"Why not?" Peg demanded.

"Shucks, I reckon she'll take the man she wants, no matter what's done," Yancey answered. His hammer clanged on a shoe and he held it up to the light in critical examination. "This is for the Doc. He wants fresh shoes all around on that hoss."

"Wants to show off, I reckon, ridin' with Alita," Peg sneered.

"Ridin', anyhow," Yancey said.

Saturday night Peg again spent a long, long time making himself presentable. For fifteen minutes he struggled with one lock of obdurate hair and had it at least partially lying down. He hurried off to the schoolhouse just in time for the auction of the boxes. Each girl had filled a box with enough food for two. These were auctioned off, the highest bidder getting the supper and the girl as company for the evening.

Peg waited patiently. He flushed at Alita's friendly smile and frowned at Harlan's haughty stare. A box with a pink ribbon came up to the schoolmaster. Peg gave Alita a swift look. She did not see him but the box had to be hers.

Peg made a bid. Harlan swung around, pinched eyes narrowing. He made a higher bid. Peg kept excitement from showing in his face. It was Alita's. He upped the bid again and Harlan came back instantly. A freckled face ranch girl giggled loudly. Peg went higher, smiled at Alita who watched him, her violet eyes round. Harlan bid higher and Peg knew he was finished. He scowled, shifted his weight, frowned and finally refused to raise. The box was knocked down to Doc Harlan.

Peg stared miserably at Alita. He had lost her—to a man whom he hated. Harlan, all smirks advanced to the platform and received the box. He turned for Alita. But instead the freckled ranch girl who had giggled, advanced coyly, blushing scarlet. Harlan stared at her in a mixture of amazement and anger.

Then his pinched eyes lifted and he glared at Peg Strickland.

Peg gaped and then a pleased grin spread over his lips. He choked back his laughter but his face reddened with the effort. Harlan smiled a bit weakly at the girl and led her outside, carrying the supper box as though it might bite him.

There were a few more boxes offered, but Peg waited for another with a pink ribbon. One already worked close to the schoolmaster's hands and that would be Alita's. The man auctioned a box done in blue and Yancey Colver was successful. He turned to claim the girl—and Alita Bowen, radiantly lovely, advanced.

Peg, stunned, half turned and watched them walk through the crowd arm in arm, Yancey Colver's ugly face lighted up like a new-painted wagon. Peg shoved his hands deep in his levis pockets and morosely watched the bidding. Doc Renford drew Mary Adams' box, others were called. Peg turned and moved disconsolately through the crowd. He stepped out the door into the soft night.

OUT by the swing, under the trees, couples shared the food. Peg kicked at the dust with his boot toe and felt lonely. Suddenly a rough hand dropped on his shoulder and he was whirled half around. Doc Harlan's anger showed in the tremble of his voice.

"You tricked me. Yuh knew that wasn't Alita's. Yuh tricked me to bidding."

Peg said nothing, but everything surged up in his brain—anger, disappointment, dislike and suspicion of the man before him. His fist smashed into Harlan's face and the rain-maker sailed backward. He landed sitting in the dust. Then, with a howl, he came to his feet and charged in, fists swinging.

Peg Strickland whooped with joy. He dodged the haymaker Harlan sent for his chin and settled himself for a pleasant fight. He dimly heard a girl scream and saw the ring of excited faces only as a blur. His attention centered on Harlan. This time the doctor connected, hard with Peg's jaw. The freighter gave ground.

Then Lem Adams, Yancey Colver and Doc Renford came rushing into the circle. The two fighters were separated. Peg tried to break loose from Yancey's powerful grip but he could do little more than wiggle. Lem Adams glared from one man to the other.

"Now you two locoed rannihans get on home. There ain't going to be no more of this fightin'. I ain't never seen men-grown act so blamed foolish!"

"I'm staying," Harlan said, his voice muffled by a bloody handkerchief. "I'm seeing Miss Bowen home."

"Blamed if yuh are!" Peg struggled against Yancey. Lem roared for silence.

"Neither of yuh roosters is seein' no one home. There'll be no more fightin' like this in Rawhide. Yancey, reckon yuh could take time to see Miss Bowen is escorted?"

"I reckon," Yancey answered.

Harlan was sent on his way first and then, when Lem thought the rain maker would be well along, he ordered Peg to rattle his hocks out of the school yard. Peg half hoped to find Harlan but he arrived at his shack without seeing his rival. He bathed his bruises and sat on the doorstep, listening to the faint sound of the dancing fiddle from the schoolhouse. At last he sighed and went to bed. After tomorrow, rain or drought, Harlan would be gone.

Sunday dawned as hot and cloudless as every day had been for a month before. Peg squinted up at the sky. It was a harsh blue. Not a breath of wind stirred anywhere and the long morning rays of the sun were already like tongues of flame. Peg nodded and pulled his hat lower over his eyes.

"Harlan will have to do some huffin' and puffin' to bring up rain today. That sidewinder will sure get showed up."

Peg joined the throng of men that streamed down the road toward Krannert's Rocking K. Rawhide was practically emptied and cowboys and ranchers from all over the valley had collected in the big field where Peg had unloaded the rain-making equipment.

Doc Harlan was everywhere. He soon had everyone working. Even the buttons were busied splicing balls of twine together and attaching them to the kites. Others opened firecrackers and tied them in bunches to the kites' tails.

Yancey Colver sweated as he fitted heavy plugs into one end of the big tubes. Others, under Harlan's orders, crammed the tubes with gunpowder and set short fuses. At the far end of the field, Krannert and his cowboys gingerly crimped caps and set fuses to dynamite sticks. Even Peg found himself lashing a stick of dynamite to a small balloon. At last the work was done and Harlan called for their attention.

"I want everything timed just right," he said. "Dynamite and gunpowder in those tubes should go off fairly close together. Get them kites up in the air so that the firecrackers will create a series of minor shocks. That's the idea, gentlemen. We set off such a powerful explosion that the upper air is disturbed. That starts it moving. Air vibrations bring the drops of moisture together and cooler air moves in. First thing, you've got a cloud that's actually dripping. That's when you get your rain."

"When'll she come?" a man demanded.

"Within a matter of hours. Early tomorrow morning at the latest. But I can tell as soon as the explosion is set off. Now, everyone to your places. I've told yuh what to do and when to do it."

There was a tense moment while Doc Harlan squinted up at the sky, then around at the assembled volunteers. His hand raised and dropped.

PEG STRICKLAND never had heard so much noise before. The heaviest battle could not have equaled it. Gunpowder let go in the tubes with a dull roar. Dynamite blasted high in the air. Added to this was the constant din of the firecrackers on the high-flying kites. Suddenly the balloon shot

skyward. Several hundred feet up, the dynamite went off. There was a tremendous blast that rocked them all and the balloon had disappeared.

Everyone looked skyward, ears ringing and deafened by the explosions. Ranchers squinted up, shading their eyes. The sky looked as usual. The men milled restlessly, necks became strained and eyes watered. Gradually their hearing came back. Kranner shook his head as he stood beside Peg.

"Ain't no sign of nothin'. We'll ask Doc Harlan."

But the Doc couldn't be found anywhere. He had simply disappeared. Suddenly Peg pulled up short as he milled with the crowd. He remembered what Yancey had said about shoes for the Doc's horse. The rain maker had fled in the midst of the excitement with the thousand dollars. Grimly, Peg ran to his own horse and spurred to Rawhide.

He pulled into the main street in time to see Harlan run from the rooming house, a carpetbag in his hand. The rain maker vaulted to the saddle, saw Peg, and set the spurs. The horse exploded in a swift rush down the street.

Peg knew despairingly that he was licked. His own horse was tired. Suddenly Harlan's mount slowed, limped, favoring one leg. Harlan set the spurs but the animal refused to run. Peg shouted and bore down on him. He vaulted from the saddle, reaching out

(Concluded on page 112)

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THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 8)

attraction, and was so successful that other cattle-raising centers soon began holding annual contests.

Now a Mammoth Business

From this start the American rodeo has grown until it is now a mammoth business, with approximately two hundred and fifty fair sized rodeos staged annually in the United States and Canada, to say nothing of the numerous district or community small rodeos staged throughout the west.

In some Texas towns chambers of commerce have built arenas and hold a rodeo each Saturday during the Summer and Fall in order to attract more trade for their merchants.

As the sport has grown, the rules have been changed to fit the fast-growing sport and showmanship has been added. In the first rodeos the steers in steer roping were given a ninety foot start before the roper was allowed to ride after them, but a few years later this was shortened to thirty feet. In those first rodeos there was no time limit in bronc riding, the rider simply rode until he was bucked off or the horse bucked out and quit, now the time limit on saddle bronc riding is ten seconds, and on bareback bronc riding eight seconds.

Steer roping was the only roping contest of the early rodeos, but about a quarter of a century ago, calf roping was added to the roping contests and is the principal lariat event of most rodeos now, there being only a few rodeos in the West where steer roping is still a contest event.

Exhibition Events

With the growth of the sport many exhibition events were added to the rodeo programs, such as fancy roping, trick riding, trained or trick horses, and the producers added events for cowgirls, knowing that good-looking girls on horseback are always a pleasing sight for the cash customers. In fact the sport that was started just to settle arguments and wagers is now full of feminine beauty and glamour.

Having told the story of the origin of the rodeo, it is now only necessary to make a few comparisons of the present day of the sport with those of its infancy and we can go on with some late news and gossip of the game.

To begin with, the rodeo that will soon be staged in Madison Square Garden will run twenty-six days. There will be forty performances. The purses are $96,350.00, to which will be added all entrance fees, which will swell the total purse to well over a hundred thousand dollars. Compare this with the purse of a hundred dollars on the first rodeo at Pecos, Texas!

The average top-hand cowboy competing in a big time rodeo today will bring to the rodeo with him a wardrobe value at around $750.00, while the contestant in those early day rodeos seldom wore anything more costly than his regular rough range garb.

It will call for a greater outlay of cash to bring the six glamour ranch girls from Texas and Oklahoma to New York for the rodeo than it would have cost to stage a complete rodeo of three or four days duration three decades ago, and the fancy boots, hats and flashy costumes they will wear will be an item of expense that will probably be greater than the cost of the garb worn by all the competitors combined at one of those early day rodeos.

Now in its fifty-seventh year as a box office attraction, the rodeo is fast taking its place as one of the greatest of American sports!

The Last Roundup

Dan Dix, one of the first rodeo clowns and one of the first to introduce a trained or trick mule in the rodeo arena, recently rode on to the last roundup in California.

Few people knew his real name, which was Miller, but in the early days of Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West show, Dix was engaged as a clown and trick rider, and was persuaded to change his name so that the public would not get the management and the clown confused.

Roy Rogers On Tour Again

Roy Rogers, cowboy movie star who was guest star of the rodeos staged at Pittsburgh, Washington, D. C., and Toronto, Canada, has obtained leave from the movie lot again for another tour of rodeos.

He is now playing at a rodeo in Montreal, Canada, and will go from there to Philadelphia for an eight day rodeo and then to New York for the Madison Square Garden Rodeo.

Keep up the good work, Roy!

Some Grand Rodeo Shows

Winning a contest at the Calgary Stampede is always a feather in the cap of the lucky contestant, because Calgary is the biggest rodeo in Canada and ranks with the biggest rodeos of the States. There are always plenty of contestants and keen competition with plenty of rough stock, so when a fellow wins there he's done something to be proud of.

It was a great show this year. Bill Linderman won the bronc riding, Muff Doan was the winner in bull riding, Mitch Owens copped the bareback bronc riding finals, Amye Gamblin won the calf roping and Pub Adair won the steer decorating.

Cheyenne Frontier Days was a great show this year with plenty of contestants. R. J. Hofmann is president, R. D. Haynesworth secretary, John Bell arena director, and Vic Schwarz, Carl Dossey and Jim Wilkinson were the judges.

Von F. DeVere, George Story and Blake Kennedy were timers. Ed Story was the announcer. Bernice Dossey, Tad and Mitzi Lucas and Polly Drayer were the trick riders. The stock was furnished by J. C. Sorenson and Ed McCarty.

The final results were: In bronc riding—First, Bill McMacken; Second, Jackie Cooper; Third, Fritz Truan; Fourth, Louis Brooks. Smokey Snyder won the bull riding, with Todd Whatley finishing in second place, Jim Whiteman third and Clayton Hill fourth.

Louis Brooks copped the bareback bronc riding, Jack Wade was second, Gerald Roberts was third and Gene Rambo fourth. In the steer wrestling Homer Pettigrew led the field to the final wire, Bill McMacken was second, Dub Phillips was third and Dave Campbell was fourth. In single steer roping Clyde Burk was best man, Toots Mansfield was second, Everett Shaw was third and Jim Snively was fourth.

So far as we know the Houston, Texas, Fat Stock Show Rodeo is the first 1945 Rodeo to have already set its dates. The dates of the show will be February 2nd to 11th. It was a great show last February and the early start in planning for next year's show bespeaks that it will be even greater.

[*Turn page*]

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The Houston show is located in the heart of the biggest cattle raising county in Texas and comes at a time when the rodeo contestants are in the South, so there's plenty of keen competition.

A Steer-Decorating Record

At the McLeod Rodeo in McLeod, Alberta, Canada, a Canadian cowboy, Roy Beard, made what is believed to be a world's record in steer decorating, turning in a time of 24/5 seconds for the feat. The distance of the start at different rodeos where they have steer decorating sometimes differs. At some places the rule is lap and tap at the start line and the decorator is not allowed to leap or touch the steer until the animal has cleared the start line. At some of the rodeos the decorator leaps almost by the time the steer sticks his nose out of the chute, but whether Beard's time is an authentic world's record or not, it is plenty fast.

Another great show was the Ogden Pioneer Days held at Ogden, Utah. With Wm. D. Wood as president, Bill Finlesey as secretary, and Harry Rowell as arena director. The show had a capable managerial staff. John Bowman and Vidal Garcia were the judges. Margaret Rowell and Dick Lockett timers, Abe Lefton announcer, and Homer Holcomb, Slim Pickens and Elmer Holcomb were the clowns.

The trick riders were Dick Griffith, Bernice Dossey, Juanita Howell, Polly Drayer, Tad and Mitizi Lucas. Rodeo stock was furnished by Harry Rowell, and the title of best bucking horse went to Major Lou.

The final results were: In bronc riding—First, Jackie Cooper; Second, Buster Ivory; Third, Bob Burrows; Fourth, Gene Rambo. Dick Griffith won the bull riding, Bob Estes was second, Wayne Ewing was third and Manuel Enos was fourth. Buster Ivory also copped the first prize in bareback bronc riding, Larry Finley was second, while Fritz Truan and Gene Rambo split third and fourth prizes by riding a dead heat for third place.

Mickey, trick horse owned by Mary Keen Wilson, rodeo performer, was electrocuted in August when its body brushed against a charged wire fence on the Wilson ranch near Dallas, Texas. The horse was valued at $1,200.00.

War Bonnet Round Up

The War Bonnet Roundup, held at Idaho Falls, Idaho, was all that could be asked for in the way of thrilling entertainment and was also a financial success. Ken Roberts won first in the finals of the bronc riding, George Yardley was second, Claude Morris was third and Eddie Curtis was fourth.

Roberts also copped first prize in the bull riding, Bill Iler was second, Jimmy Hazen

was third and Kid Roberts fourth.

In the bareback bronc riding Hank Mills was the winner, with Jimmy Hazen second, Al Garrett was third and Wayne Ewing fourth. N. A. Pittcock won the calf roping, with Harry Hart a close second, Dick Anderson third and Pete Grubb fourth.

Harry Hart was best man in the steer wrestling, Art Jones was second, Ted Meese third and George Yardley fourth.

The Cardston, Alberta, Canada, Rodeo, was a swell show and well attended. Carl Olson won the bronc riding, with Jim Robinson finishing a close second, Ernest Emery was third and Herb Doens fourth.

Fred Gladstone won the calf roping, with Paget Berry finishing in second place, George Fox third and Pete Bruisehead fourth.

Duffy Stewart won the steer decorating, Paget Berry was second, Willie Head was third and Harry Shade fourth.

Louis Brooks in the Lead

It never happened before, but there must be a first time for everything, and it looks like this is the year it will happen! A cowboy winning the much coveted title of World's Champion All Around Cowboy two years in succession! Louis Brooks, who won the title last year, looks like a repeater.

The Rodeo Association of America Bulletin, giving the standing of all contestants in the title race up to the last of August, gave Brooks the lead with 5953 points. Homer Pettigrew was in second place with 4983, which gave Brooks a lead of 970 points over his nearest rival, and that is a lot of slack for a contestant to take up in the time remainder of the 1944 season, and barring a serious accident Louis has a mighty good chance to be the first cowboy ever to win the title two years in succession.

Well, that is about all there is left in the pots and pans of the old Chuck Wagon at the present time, so we will prepare to get rolling along to the next stop and so will be saying *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE great and bloody War between the States was over and in the late September of 1865, John Douglas Prescott wearily made his way homewards. He was one of a great army of beaten, tired, starved Confederates, returning to a scourged and ravished South, to take up their shattered lives where Destiny had interrupted it.

Prescott, a cowboy from the Red River country of Oklahoma, had been an irregular—a guerrilla fighter—serving in no regular troop but fighting wherever the fortunes of war had led him. Now he was going home to ruin and chaos. His father had been

[*Turn page*]

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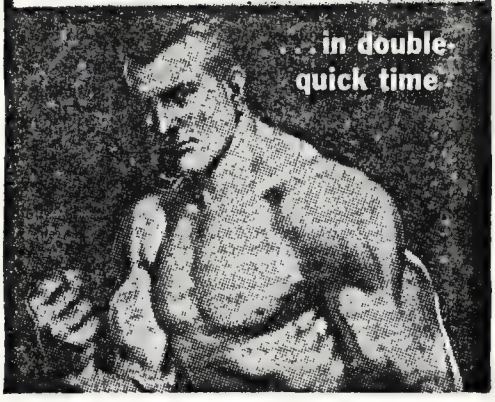

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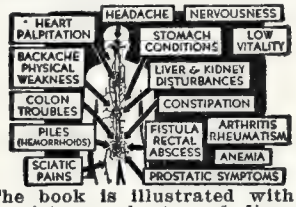

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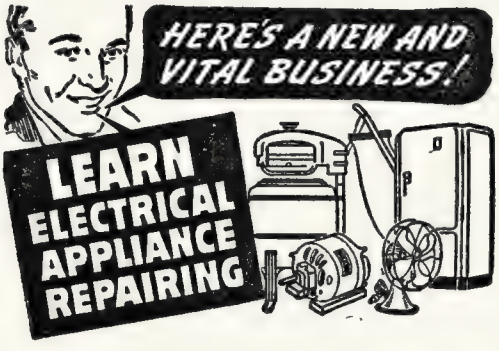

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killed by raiders, so word had been brought to him—the home ranch was probably in ruins.

Riding through the Ozarks on a jaded horse, his immediate problems were food, water and clothes—since folks did not take kindly to guerrilla soldiers after Quantrell's murderous raids.

A cabin in the woods loomed up. Prescott hailed, got no answer. He went in. There was food—corn for his horse, biscuits and coffee for himself. There were clothes—a hickory shirt and a pair of jeans. He stripped off his cavalry boots, uniform and sword and changed.

There was something else there too—a girl and a musket. She stood in the doorway, barefoot, with braids down her back, no more than fourteen years old. But the gun was handled efficiently and her voice was firm.

"Put back that jumper coat on the peg, you—you dirty raider!"

Prescott tried to reassure her

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm just a discharged soldier on my home. Honest, I thought nobody—"

"You're a dirty Jawhawk guerrilla! I know your kind. I bet you're one of Quantrell's raiders! Take off them pants!"

That was something he couldn't do—even if the girl was only fourteen. But she meant business, as he saw when the hammer on her old musket clicked to full shooting position. So he moved swiftly and brushed the barrel aside just as she pulled the trigger. Then he found he had a wildcat in his arms and it took all his strength to pin her down. As soon as she quit fighting he released her.

"I'm goin' to keep these clothes," he said gently. "I need 'em worse'n yore paw does. I'll leave my cavalry sword as part payment. It's clean, d'you hear me?"

That was Prescott's first meeting with the girl Allie, but not his last. They met again in the West, in the West of great mountains and wide plains when Allie was no longer a girl of fourteen, but a lovely grown woman.

It was Prescott's evil star that made each meeting with her a catastrophe. The first time he fought her and took her father's clothes.

The second time, though it was not his fault, his passing cleaned out her father's little cattle herd and left her family ruined. The third time—but that was the worst of all and by then Allie had had enough of this guerrilla from the past who seemed to bring ill fortune every time he appeared.

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In ZORRO RUNS THE GAUNTLET, Johnston McCulley again takes up the adventures of his dashing hero, the man of mystery, Zorro. It was only the cry of a girl in distress but it was enough for Zorro. The girl was Inez Feliz and she was a most pretty girl, *si*. Moreover her distress was caused by one Juan Ruiz, who, in the word of Don Diego, was "a sore on the face of officialdom."

So Zorro's pistol and rapier flashed in the moonlight and his big black horse thundered down the roads as he ran the gauntlet of troopers to aid the innocent and rescue the weak from the greedy and strong.

As always, author McCulley has written us a gay and splendid story of light hearts, blazing courage and flashing swords in old California. It's a treat!

And don't overlook the new Rawhide story, SIXGUN FOR A PREACHER, by Tom Parsons. Young Doc Renford of Rawhide had been called on many strange cases, but none stranger than his abduction to save the life of a wounded bandit. For the bandit was so gravely wounded that he was sure to die, a glance told Doc that much. And the bandit leader, the killer Jack Bolas, promised that if he died, with him would die the doctor and two other captives: Mary Adams, the doctor's fiancee and the Reverend Douglas Carter, new parson of Rawhide.

It was not a comfortable situation. It was a deadlock which gave no way out. For the wounded man did die, and—

Didn't think we were going to tell you any more and spoil the story for you, did you? You'll get the answer when you read SIXGUN FOR A PREACHER by Tom Parsons, the new exciting Rawhide story!

LETTER BOX

WITH all the fine letters we get from you readers, it's quite a problem to select the few we have space to print. As you know we try to get a few that are typical of all. Anyway, here's a rather longer letter whose eloquence leads us to print it in full:

I have just finished reading No. II, Vol. 57 of WEST Magazine. It is the first copy of that publication coming to my desk and following its perusal, I have the impulse to tell you something about the impressions its contents have made upon my mind, and may I say, heart.

The title enlisting my deepest attention is "THE STRANGER IN BOOTS". The author, Bradford Scott, seems to have the happy faculty of using the right words in the right places and his descriptions of situations, landscapes, flora, vegetation, sunrises, sunsets, terrain, skylines, etc., marks him as the master builder of a story that has about all the essential features of a classic in fiction, the primal theme of which devoutly and definitely emphasizes a mission that is practical, philosophic and morally sound and applicable to all classes of human beings, no matter in what social, religious, political or commercial strata they may be found.

Just enough intrigue and gun-slinging to give the narrative a consistently flavored atmosphere of the old West and pioneer character.

The author of this interest-compelling story can easily be classed as the Washington Irving of the most thought provoking time in American history.

THE STRANGER IN BOOTS is worthy of a place in every library of merit in the United States and

[*Turn to page 110*]

Perhaps I'm one war older than you are!

Believe me, after the last war I saw what happened. Will you let me give you some advice?

●

If you've got a job today—for your own sake, fellow, be smart! Think twice before you fight for a wage increase that might force prices up and land you behind the eight-ball in the end.

Salt away as much as you can out of your present wages. Put money in the bank, pay up your debts, buy more life insurance. Above all, put every extra penny you can lay your hands on into Uncle Sam's War Bonds.

Nobody knows what's coming when the Germans and the Japs are licked. Perhaps we'll have good times. Okay. You'll be sitting pretty. Perhaps we'll have bad times. Then they're sure to hit hardest on the guy with nothing saved.

The best thing you can do for your country right now is not to buy a thing you can get along without. That helps keep prices down, heads off inflation, helps to insure good times after the war.

And the best thing you can do for your own sake, brother, if there *should* be a depression ahead, is to get your finances organized on a sound basis of paid-up debts—and have a little money laid by to see you through!

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possibly of the world. Whether a knowledge of the identity of The Stranger would be helpful in the spiritual interpretation of that story is, of course, problematical and perhaps debatable, but however that may be, no person can read this story analytically and not be refreshed mentally, morally and spiritually.

The author of this book-length novel has contributed something definite to the literature of our time that will live through the years and many successive perusals. He dwells upon the value and force of an understanding smile, which inspires me to write the following lines:

A friendly smile at times will tell
More Truth than could the longest speech
About the heart's deep mystic well
And things that seem beyond our reach.
As wily spiders spin their web,
From something none knows what or not,
Even so our lives rise and ebb
By some great force we cannot wot.
So each day let each act and thought
Be true to that immortal hope,
That when can be seen what we have wrought,
There'll be no need for metaphor or trope.

As to the balance of the titles, they are all good, educational, readable and the publishers are to be congratulated upon the character of this magazine called WEST.

—*Lewis Barney Fretz, Gardena, Cal.*

To which we can only say Amen. Seldom do we see such lavish and eloquent praise, but Mr. Fretz is right, seldom is such a novel as THE STRANGER IN BOOTS published in Western magazines.

Well this gives us room for about one more letter, which is from a soldier, so as you know, we do not give his address:

I've just finished my first copy of your magazine and I think it is swell. My home is in Oregon and I know what big ranches are like as there are quite a few of them in Eastern Oregon. Good luck.

—*Pfc. V. W. Dunagan.*

Keep your letters and cards coming, friends. Address The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Look for the coupon in this department which enables you to join the RANGE RIDERS' CHUCK WAGON CLUB. Clip the coupon, sign it and mail it in today. You'll get a membership card *pronto*. There are no dues or fees of any kind. See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

IMPORTANT NOTICE

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Editor WEST
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1-45

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IT can't be true that the American people have to be talked into buying War Bonds. The people don't quibble about interest rates or question the security of the investment but most of us have never regarded ourselves as important investors and never study investment as financiers do. We are savers, but ordinarily we save in savings accounts or through insurance.

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The unhappy experience seems appropriate to the day's lesson. If we fail in this war all of us go straight to the bottom where the money can't buy anything.

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ODD MAN'S TURN

(Concluded from page 101)

and dragging Harlan to the ground with him.

The rain maker snarled and struck at Peg. He broke loose for an instant, struggled to his feet. His hand plunged inside his coat and reappeared with a deadly little derringer. Desperately Peg threw himself at the man, long arms reaching out. The derringer exploded and Peg felt a crease of fire along his shoulder. Then his hand closed on Harlan's arm. His fist cracked solidly against Harlan's jaw and the fight was over.

By the time Lem Adams reached Rawhide at the head of the crowd, Peg Strickland had locked his prisoner in the store's ice box and had cleaned and patched up his wound. Eight hundred dollars lay on the counter, the rest having been spent on such things as kites and dynamite. He triumphantly put the money in Lem's hands and beamed with pleasure as Krannert and the ranchers thanked him for catching the swindler.

"Shucks, it was easy," Peg said, and added with a burst of generosity, "Yancey must have figured something like this. He fixed Harlan's hoss so it'd throw a shoe. He didn't have a chance."

"Yancey's smart," Lem said. His contemptuous glance lashed over Harlan, who still shivered and looked blue from his stay in the ice box. "He figured yore play, Harlan, said nothin' about it and quietly kept yuh from making a get-away. He done something else mighty quiet, too. While you two fellers was snarlin' over Alita Bowen, Yancey courted her. I saw them as we came in, drivin' to Pinto to get hitched. Smart hombre, Yancey Colver."

Peg Strickland's jaw dropped and his blue eyes stared at Lem. He swallowed a couple of times hard, then slowly scratched his head, his face thoughtfully screwed up. Finally he grinned.

"Odd man wins, I reckon. Who'd have thought it?"

Doc Harlan was released, told to leave town and never come back. The next day Yancey and his bride returned from Pinto and Peg was the first to hold out his hand in congratulation, though he claimed the right to kiss the bride. Quiet settled on Rawhide and the ranchers again stared hopefully up into the sky.

Oh yes, the next day it rained.

●

Next Issue's Rawhide Story

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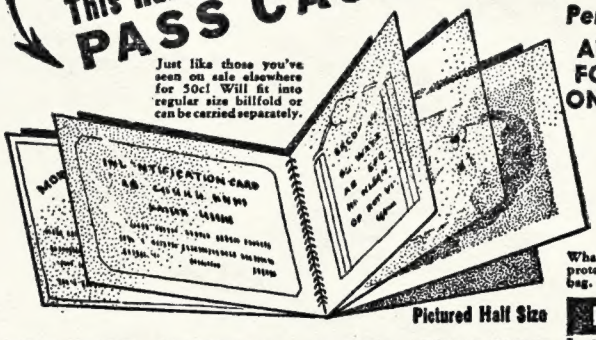

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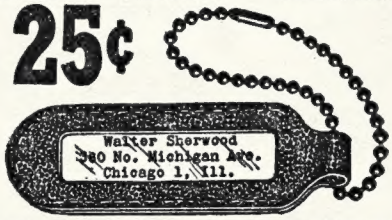

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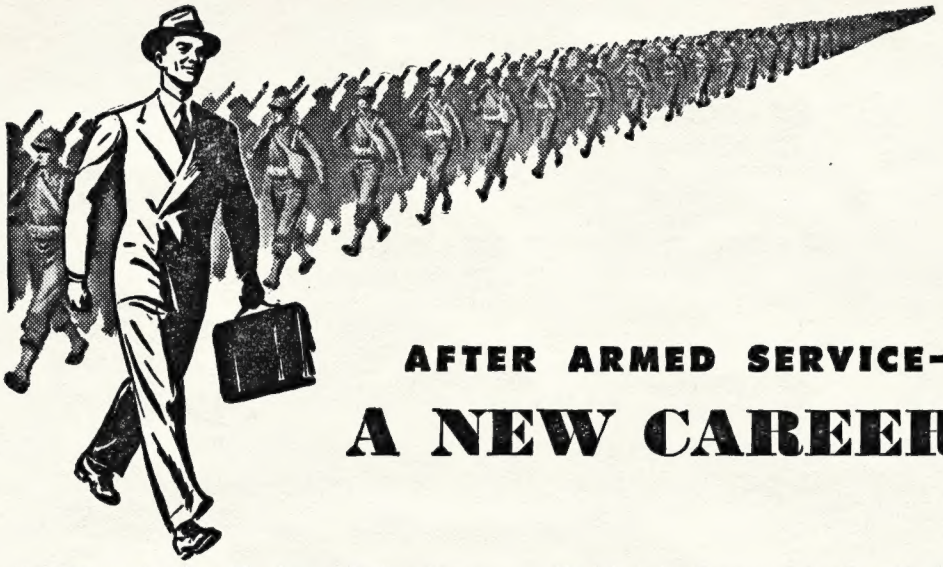

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